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Guitarist

ISSUE 509 APRIL 2024

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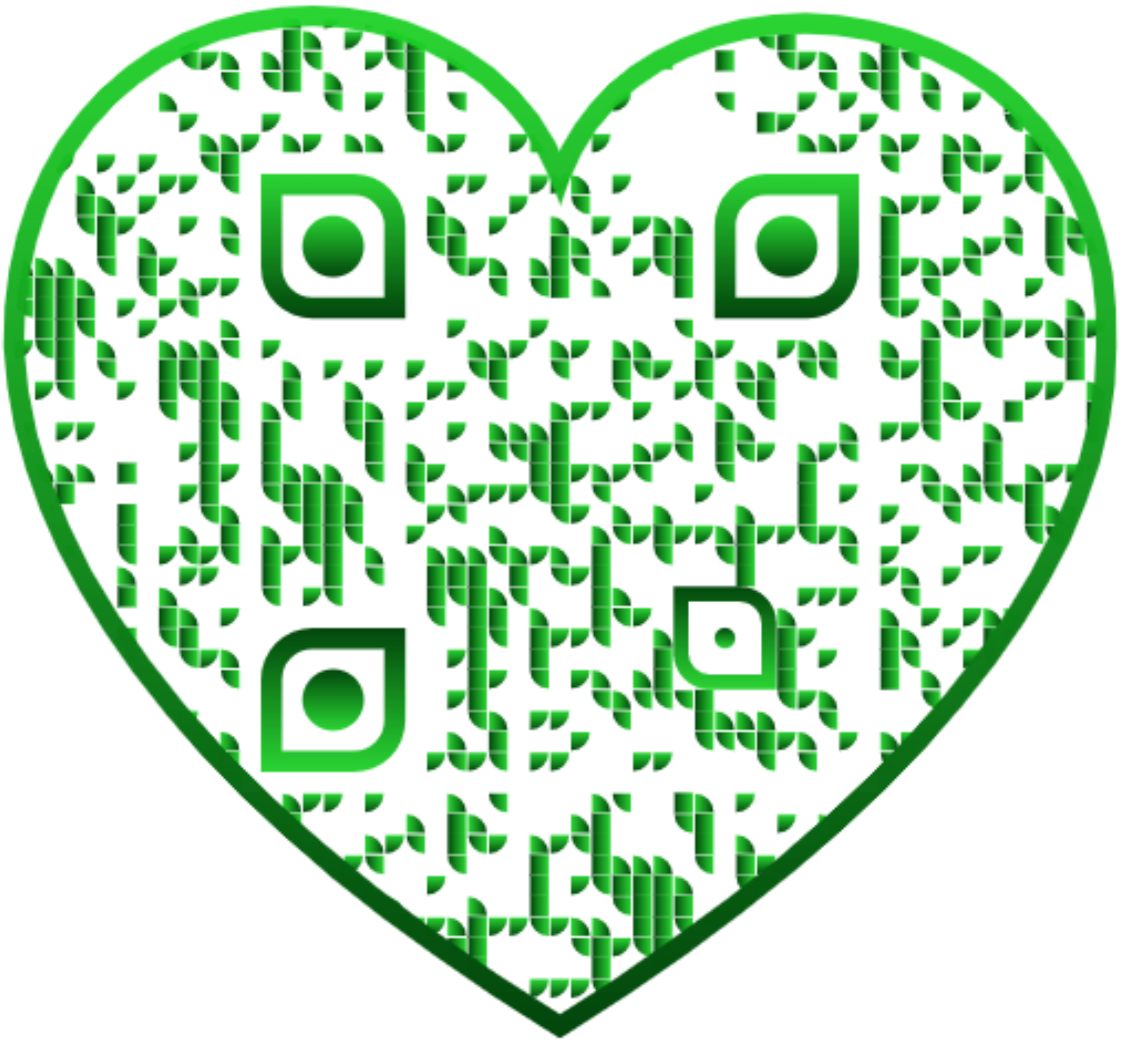

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Fit For Repurpose

Putting together this month's feature on Fender offsets and their various offshoots, vintage and modern, you can't help but think how many guitars were designed for one thing but ended up being famous for another. The Les Paul was, after all, designed as a suave jazz guitar – but gained fame and popularity only after it made Marshalls howl. Likewise, has there ever been a more gloriously misnamed electric than the Jazzmaster? Off the top of my head, I can think of more jazz players who used a Telecaster (such as Ed Bickert or, in more recent times, Julian Lage) than a Jazzmaster, and though I did find some interesting footage on YouTube of Joe Pass playing a Jaguar (oh, the irony!), it seems that the jazz hardcore weren't impressed with Leo's genre-specific toy. Jazzmasters and scuzzy distortion, though? Everyone from Thurston Moore to Kevin Shields and J Mascis comes to mind.

No good deed goes unpunished, as they say, and Leo Fender's attempt to offer jazz players a refined tool for creating urbane melodies eventually got used to tear down the masonry of popular music like an SDS drill during the grunge era. But that probably says something healthy about music – it is a slippery thing that defies attempts to confine it.

But even as we recognise how offsets became a key part of the New Wave scene and then grunge and finally post-rock, it's healthy to remember that Leo's designs still have room to keep transforming. Anyone who doubts that you can play soaring solos on an offset should hear Chris Buck of Cardinal Black play one – and that potential hasn't been ignored by the world's other guitar makers. From Tom Anderson to PJD, everyone makes an offset these days, and you'll as likely find them loaded with a hot humbucker as you will a vintage-output single-coil pickup.

Yet, in a final irony, all the switching options on the original Jazzmaster and Jaguar that Fender clearly believed heralded the future, back in the 50s and 60s, have typically been simplified in modern reimaginings of the offset such as Johnny Marr's signature Jaguar or Gordon Smith's Gatsby solidbody. It seems, in the final analysis, that what guitarists need to express themselves is not a phalanx of fiddly features but a comfortable, versatile vehicle for inspiration that connects with their soul – and offsets certainly offer that, today as never before. Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

Scott Henderson
The godfather of virtuosic multi-genre fusion shares his thoughts on what matters in electric improvisation, plus his new album on **p38**

Idle Moments
Intense, dark, multi-layered, the music created by Idles presents a different vision of how guitar can be viscerally exciting on **p60**

Tommy & Molly
Has there ever been an acoustic duo more dynamic? During a recent UK tour, they joined us to chat bluegrass, country and more on **p54**

COVER: COVER IMAGE BY PHIL BARKER

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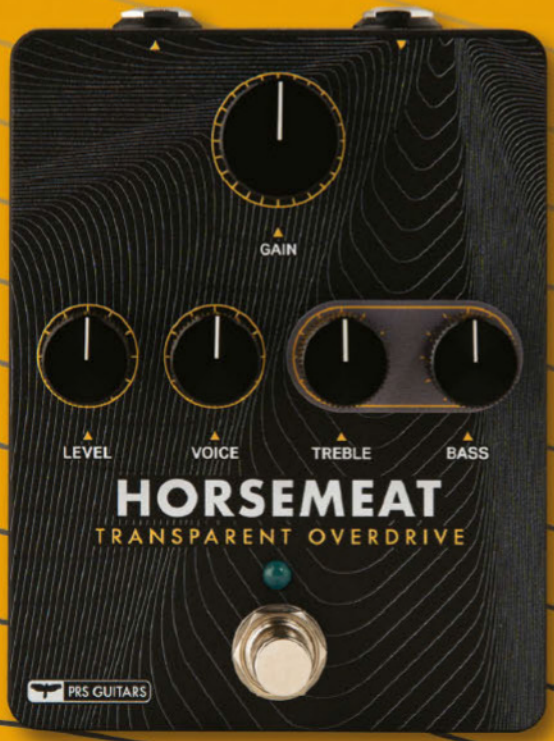

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– Paul Reed Smith

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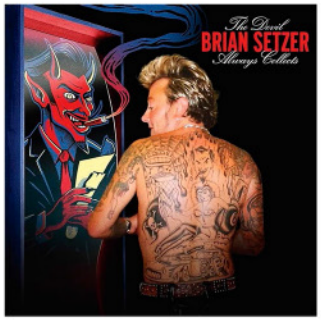

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The Kraken VX MKII

VICTORY VX THE KRAKEN MKII LUNCH BOX HEAD
£1,399

WHAT IS IT? 50-watt upgraded version of Victory's high-gain amp head with new Clean mode similar to that of the VX Super Kraken

Return Of The Kraken

Victory's compact high-gain monster is back, revamped and improved, and with a new Clean mode

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

One of the most popular British guitar influencers on YouTube, Rabea Massaad is well known as a tasteful and highly accomplished modern rock player who can out-metal the best of them whenever he needs to. He's also an artist and consultant for Victory Amplification and Victory's VX Kraken is Massaad's baby – the result of a longterm, ongoing collaboration that's inspired a range of definitive British metal amps and pedals, which are a perfect fit for Massaad's high-gain detuned signature tones. Over the past few years, the lunchbox VX Kraken has been reworked and tweaked, and was recently released as VX The Kraken MKII Lunch Box Head. Let's check out the new, improved version.

The MKII Lunch Box Head uses the same robust steel chassis and perforated steel lid as Victory's other lunchbox models, with a new graphite sparkle paint finish adding a touch of class. The steelwork is precision folded and uses larger than average machine screws to secure everything, so it's easy to dismantle and service when needed. This isn't always the case with lunchbox products; to dodge mishaps we replace screws by hand to avoid stripping threads, fit them all loosely before tightening and use the correct screwdriver with the right sized tip.

Inside the chassis, the MKII's electronics sit on one large high-quality printed circuit board, including most of the front- and rear-panel controls and all the valve bases. The resistors are metal film to minimise hiss, with clean bright solder joints and neatly bundled wiring.

Like its predecessor, the MKII Lunch Box Head is a two-channel head, with separate gain and master volume controls feeding a shared EQ. Gain I is a British-voiced crunch/rhythm channel, with a foot-switchable attenuated gain stage offering a new Clean mode, while Gain II is the American-voiced lead channel. These three voices can be accessed from the front-panel three-way toggle switch, or by using the supplied footswitches. The front panel now includes a Presence control, while on the rear panel the Bass Focus switch has also been joined by a Presence Shift button.

1. The front control panel is straightforward and easy to navigate, with a classy look thanks to the new paint job. There's a new Presence control, and a Clean mode for Gain I, accessed from the front-panel toggle switch or a remote footswitch

Other new additions include a Gain I Balance knob to adjust the relative levels of Clean and Gain I to taste, and Bias Test Points with an adjustment screw. Finally, there are sockets for the MKII's series effects loop and two two-button footswitches. The footswitch functionality has changed slightly: the effects loop has been sacrificed to accommodate remote switching between Clean and Gain I together with Clean/Gain I and Gain II, while the second footswitch selects either master volume control and has a bypass to Gain II/Master II as a solo override function. An Auto Assign switch links Clean/Gain I to Master I and Gain II to Master II when activated; otherwise, the master volumes are selected independently from the footswitch. Both footswitches are clearly labelled, with handy LED status indicators to show what's active – which is good as there aren't any on the front panel.

The MKII Lunch Box Head comes with 6L6 power valves as standard, but it can take EL34s by flipping a small Bias Range switch hidden out of harm's way on the top of the chassis. Another recessed slider on the side of the chassis selects 230 volts or 110 volts wall mains.

The single-ended option on the original amp has been removed, although the High/Low power switching is still there on the front panel, giving you a choice of either 50 watts full power or approximately nine watts, ideal for studio or home use. Overall, the MKII Lunch Box Head is built to Victory's high standards and should handle anything rock 'n' roll can throw at it.

Sounds

We checked out the MKII Lunch Box Head with our regular Strat and Les Paul, along with a second Strat strung with 0.012 to 0.052-gauge strings and detuned a whole

2. The VX The Kracken MKII Lunch Box Head comes with two two-button footswitches (the inputs for which are clearly labelled on the back panel, see top image): one selects Clean/Gain I and Gain II, the other selects either master volume, together with a solo override. Both footswitches have LED status indicators, and so as long as they're plugged in you can see what each function is doing

The new clean voice has a decent dose of harmonic content with a subtle compression that flatters the guitar

tone. The new clean voice is very rewarding to use and just needed a little tweak to the rear panel Balance control to balance the level with Gain I. It's not the hi-fi clean we've heard on some metal amps, which can often sound flat and unrewarding. Instead, there's a decent dose of harmonic content with a subtle compression that flatters the guitar, providing excellent string-to-string separation and articulation.

3. Another new addition is the Presence Shift switch, which lifts the frequency range that the Presence control operates over, expanding the highs for a more contemporary vibe. Combined with the Bass Focus switch, this allows precise control of the power stage response

4

The British-voiced Gain I is great for laying down powerful crunch rhythm tracks, with a blistering fast attack that complements chug-chug 'djent' riffing. Meanwhile, the American-voiced Gain II channel has all the gain and drive you'd expect, making it easy to pull out harmonic squeals and feedback at will. Tonally, both channels sound great with single coils or humbuckers, although the high-gain levels make humbuckers the better choice for keeping noise at bay.

The new Presence control helps to precisely dial in the power amp's response, and we really liked the way the Presence Shift switch opened up the highs without making things sound shrill or piercing. There's no shortage of volume here, either; we had the master volumes at around 10 o'clock and at those settings the Kraken can easily fill a hall, so the low power option is best suited for home or studio use.

Verdict

The MKII Lunch Box Head looks and sounds the business, with superb metal tones that inspire plenty of detuned riffing. The new Clean mode increases flexibility, while the Presence control and Shift functions extend the amp's already impressive tonal range. As well as being a great choice for metal genres, it's also an ideal platform for pedals, helped by the smooth extended lows of its 6L6 power section. The amp comes with a padded carry bag that fits in most aircraft overhead lockers – perfect for travelling and ideal for those who regularly fly to gigs.

Aimed at serious amateurs and professionals, it's not the cheapest lunchbox metal head out there, but it's made in the UK to a very high standard and, as with most things, you get what you pay for. If detuned modern rock and metal is your thing, it's definitely one to check out. G

5

4. Bias Test Points and adjustment on the rear panel make it easier and safer to keep the output valves running at peak efficiency. A Bias Range switch hidden out of harm's way on the top of the chassis makes it possible to use EL34s instead of standard 6L6s

5. The MKII Lunch Box Head's twin master volumes can be set to work independently or linked to Gain I and II. A footswitchable solo override feature always activates Gain II plus Master II

VICTORY VX THE KRAKEN MKII LUNCH BOX HEAD

PRICE: £1,399
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All-valve pre and power amp
VALVES: 4x 12AX7 preamp, 2x 6L6
OUTPUT: 50/9W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 350 (w) x 190 (d) x 180mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 7/16
CABINET: Steel
CHANNELS: 2, with footswitchable Clean mode on Gain I
CONTROLS: Clean/Gain I level, Clean or Gain I/Gain II selector switch, Gain II level, bass, middle, treble. Master volume I, master volume II, presence, high/low power switch. Rear panel: Gain I Balance, Presence Shift, Bass Focus, master volume auto assign
FOOTSWITCH: 2x 2-button footswitches (supplied) select channels and Gain I/Clean mode, master volume I/II and Gain II master volume II (solo override)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Switchable output power from 50W to approx. 9W. Series effects loop. Bias test points and overall bias adjustment on rear panel
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Kraken V4 amp pedal (£849), VX Kraken MKII compact head in wooden sleeve (£1,529), VX Kraken 100 head (£2,199). 1x12 extension cabinets start at £619, 2x12 cabs sell from £899, full-fat 4x12 is £1,299

Victory Amplification
www.victoryamps.com

8/10

PROS Top-quality high-gain head, perfect for modern rock, metal and detuned instruments; new features improve flexibility; rear-panel Bias Test Points and adjustment make it easier and safer to service

CONS Not so subtle for mild overdrive sounds; dual-footswitch operation is a little confusing; effects loop no longer footswitchable; single-ended mode has been removed; no LEDs on front panel for channel mode/status

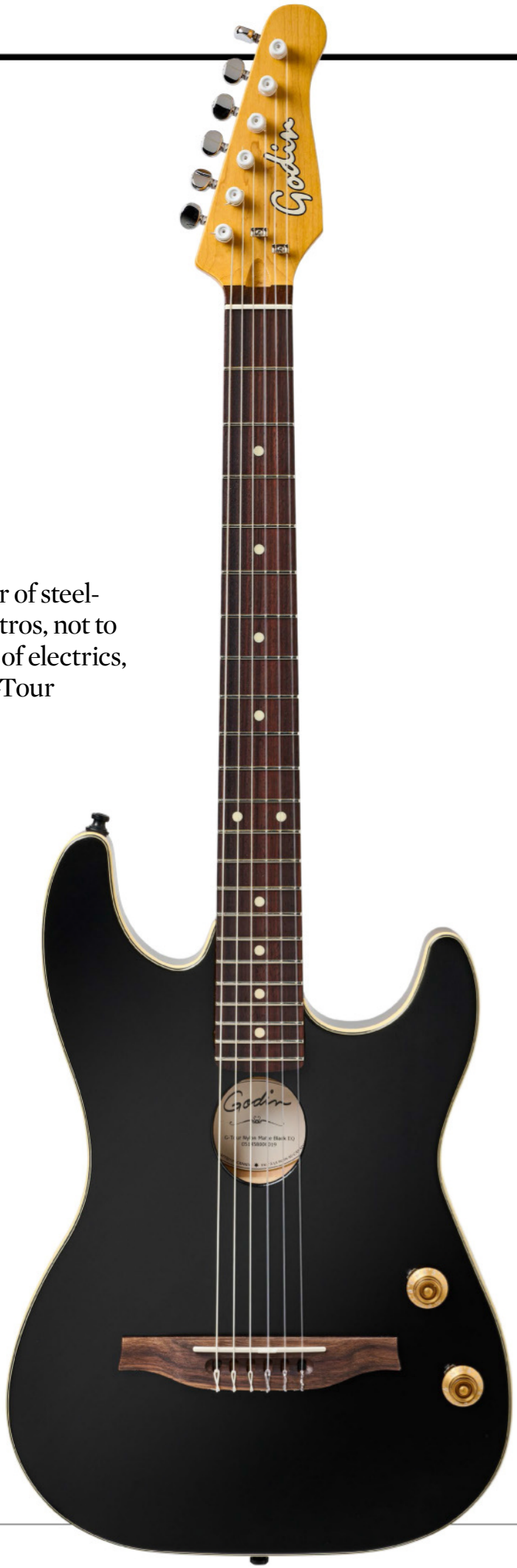
GODIN G-TOUR
£1,749

WHAT IS IT? Canadian-made electric-guitar-shaped thinline nylon-string with top-mounted controls and 22-fret bolt-on neck

Mystery Tour

As Canada's foremost manufacturer of steel- and nylon-string acoustics and electros, not to mention an increasingly broad line of electrics, Godin combines its past into the G-Tour

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Olly Curtis



It's been a little quiet on the Godin front in recent months, but the Canadian giant announced a new UK distribution partner towards the end of 2023, so the expansive range will hopefully be more accessible. And when we say expansive, we mean it. Just under the Godin brand – other house brands include Norman, Seagull and Simon & Patrick – we have regular steel- and nylon-string acoustics and electros, stage-aimed 'crossover' models such as the long-running Multiacs, instruments for 'world' musicians, and an extensive range of hollow, thinline and solidbody electrics.

Before we get to look at some of the new-for-2024 models, we managed to get our hands on a pretty unique model that launched during the distribution changeover period: the G-Tour. This instrument certainly blurs the line between the electric guitar and the nylon-string electro-acoustic, the latest in a long line of stage-aimed nylon-strings that lie within Godin's range. The term 'crossover' is often used for such modernist excursions – for example, a nylon-string with a narrower neck, a cambered fingerboard and often a thinner-depth body – but the G-Tour is more a thinline, mainly hollow electric with nylon strings.

1. The combination of the Fender-style headstock with the upright classical-style string posts is pretty unusual – likewise, the electric-like string trees and narrow nut width

2. The G-Tour is a very simple drive with its top-mounted volume and tone controls, both of which have a centre detent – a good starting point for both, especially the tone control

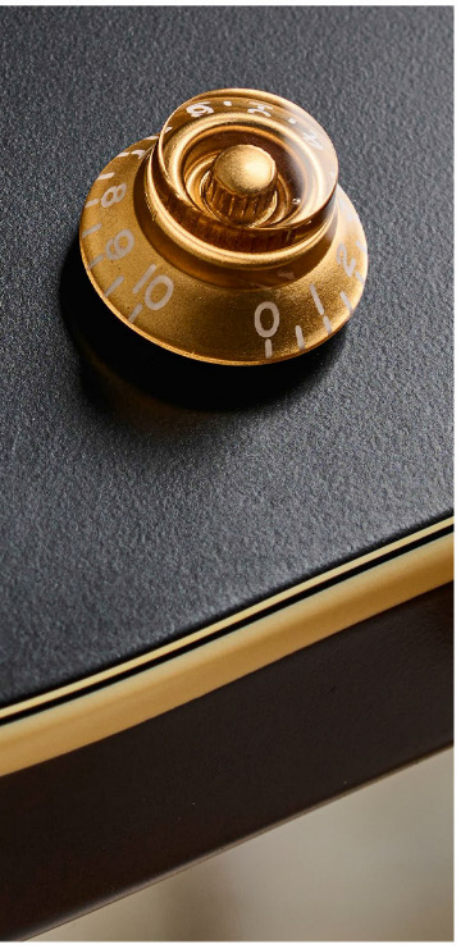
3. The necessary battery is found on the back cover plate, under which you can see the extensive chambering of the guitar's body

Here, we have a matt black top finish with dark brown-stained back and sides, which have a more satin finish. The modern Stratocaster-inspired body has a solidbody depth of 47mm and employs a solid cedar lightly braced flat top with a silver leaf maple back that's heavily chambered and braced. The top-edge is bound; the small soundhole isn't. On the back is a pretty sizable ribcage contour.

The neck continues the classic electric vibe, screwing to the body via a neckplate that's shaped to match the contoured body heel. It's also a 22-fret neck with a standard Fender scale, only a couple of millimetres shy of the standard 650mm classical scale length, and has a 305mm (12-inch) fingerboard radius. Unusually, while the tuners appear to be regular die-cast types, they have plastic roller string posts as you'd find on a classical guitar, although there's no slotted headstock here and they stick up at right angles to the headstock face, which is rather odd. We even get a couple of electric-like string trees and a large open hole to access the dual-action truss rod. Aside from the nylon strings, the only other classical reference is the tie-block rosewood bridge with its compensated Graph Tech Tusq saddle.

The G-Tour will more likely appeal to the electric player who fancies some nylon sound using a pick

Unusual for a thinline electro, though not unique, are the top-mounted volume and tone controls with Gibson-style top-hat knobs and those rather archaic (and unnecessary) pointed position indicators. There's no information on the actual circuit used here, aside from the fact it's an under-saddle EPM Q-Discrete (also called a Quantum Discrete) system that's used by Godin on plenty of other models. There's a separate cavity for the battery that sits on the back cover plate over a rectangular hole, which is necessary to install the electronics. The output is on the side on a cleanly installed Electrosocket-type mounting. Removing that cover plate, you can peer inside and see the thin top bracing. To call the guitar chambered is understatement; the body routing is considerable, leaving a pretty thin back, and sides that aren't much thicker.



HOW SMALL?

Necks are usually bigger on nylon-string guitars, but not here

Back in issue 489 we took a look at Córdoba's Stage, which is more 'crossover' in style and also features top-mounted controls for a simple drive. Despite the style, it's a very different-feeling guitar and also a lot less expensive than the Godin, streeting around £599. Let's compare the two more closely.

(Dimensions in mm, unless stated)	CÓRDOBA STAGE	GODIN G-TOUR
Scale length	650	648
Neck width at nut	48.9	42.35
String spacing at nut	38.5	35
Neck width at 12th	59.67	52.1
String spacing at bridge	57.5	53
Neck depth at 1st fret	20.4	20.9
Neck depth at 9th fret	23.5	22.8
Body depth at rim	41.7	47
Body width	352	321
Weight (kg/lb)	2.32/5.1	2.26/4.97

Bolt-on neck nylon-strings are a rarity but do offer some adjustability should you need it. The double-cutaway design gives full access to the 22-fret fingerboard

Feel & Sounds

Not surprisingly, then, it's a very light guitar, weighing just 2.26kg (4.97lb), and for any electric player it feels very familiar played seated or strapped on. But if you're used to the wider neck, even of a contemporary 'crossover' nylon-string, you might struggle a little. The nut width is Fender electric-like at 42.35mm with a string spacing of an electric-standard 35mm, whereas the spacing at the bridge is even narrower than Fender-standard at 53mm (see Dimensions chart above). Our sample needed a truss rod tweak to straighten the slight forward bow, and with virtually zero relief the string height drops to approximately 2.23mm on the high E, measuring 2.55mm on the low E, which is very low for the style but seems to be the key. The neck itself has a slightly V'd profile, which suits thumb-around playing and is very different from a classical-style shape. Likewise, the medium-gauge and well-polished frets – plus, of course, we have easy access to the top of the fingerboard.

While there's not much acoustic volume, plugged into our AER we're met with a strong output, louder than either of our Yamaha and Córdoba nylon-electro references, in fact. There is a subtle centre detent on both the rotary controls, which

Apart from the strings, the tie-block bridge is the only reminder that this is a nylon-string guitar. Good to see a compensated Tusq saddle

seems a good place to start, rather than with both full up. The string-to-string output is pretty well balanced, and the G string slightly hot. Perhaps not surprisingly, the bass end isn't the biggest we've heard, but that's probably not a bad thing, especially for ensemble or band situations. The

The neck has a slightly V'd profile, which suits thumb-around playing and is very different from a classical-style shape

midrange is a little more forward than either of our references, but that's easy to balance outboard from either our AER's controls or an additional dedicated preamp. Just remember: aside from the tone control, you have no onboard EQ help. The tone control actually works very well, not least if you start in that centre mid-position where turning the control clockwise adds a treble lift that's not over-harsh, a little more flamenco perhaps, and turned anti-clockwise the response is more mellow with a usable character shift.

While it takes a little adjustment with the spacing and the nylon strings, the quality of sound here is very good. We used a Carl Martin Acoustic GiG multi-effect pedal, which is quite the perfect match, particularly with its tuner, EQ, compression and tap-tempo delay. Gradually, the G-Tour begins to make a lot of sense.

Verdict

Mixing up the styles as the G-Tour does is always going to create a polarising result. While the build is of a pretty high standard, the G-Tour will more likely appeal to the electric player who fancies some nylon sound, probably using a pick, and for that it's a simple drive and very fit for purpose. If you've already entered the nylon-string world via a classical guitar or a more modern 'crossover', however, you simply might find the electric-like neck width and string spacing way too cramped. But, of course, Godin has plenty of options with nylon-electro models that have wider necks and more expansive dual-source pickups and EQ to choose from. It's not a cheap date, either, but you can't help applauding Godin for trying something a little different – something the company has done plenty of times over the years. G

GODIN G-TOUR

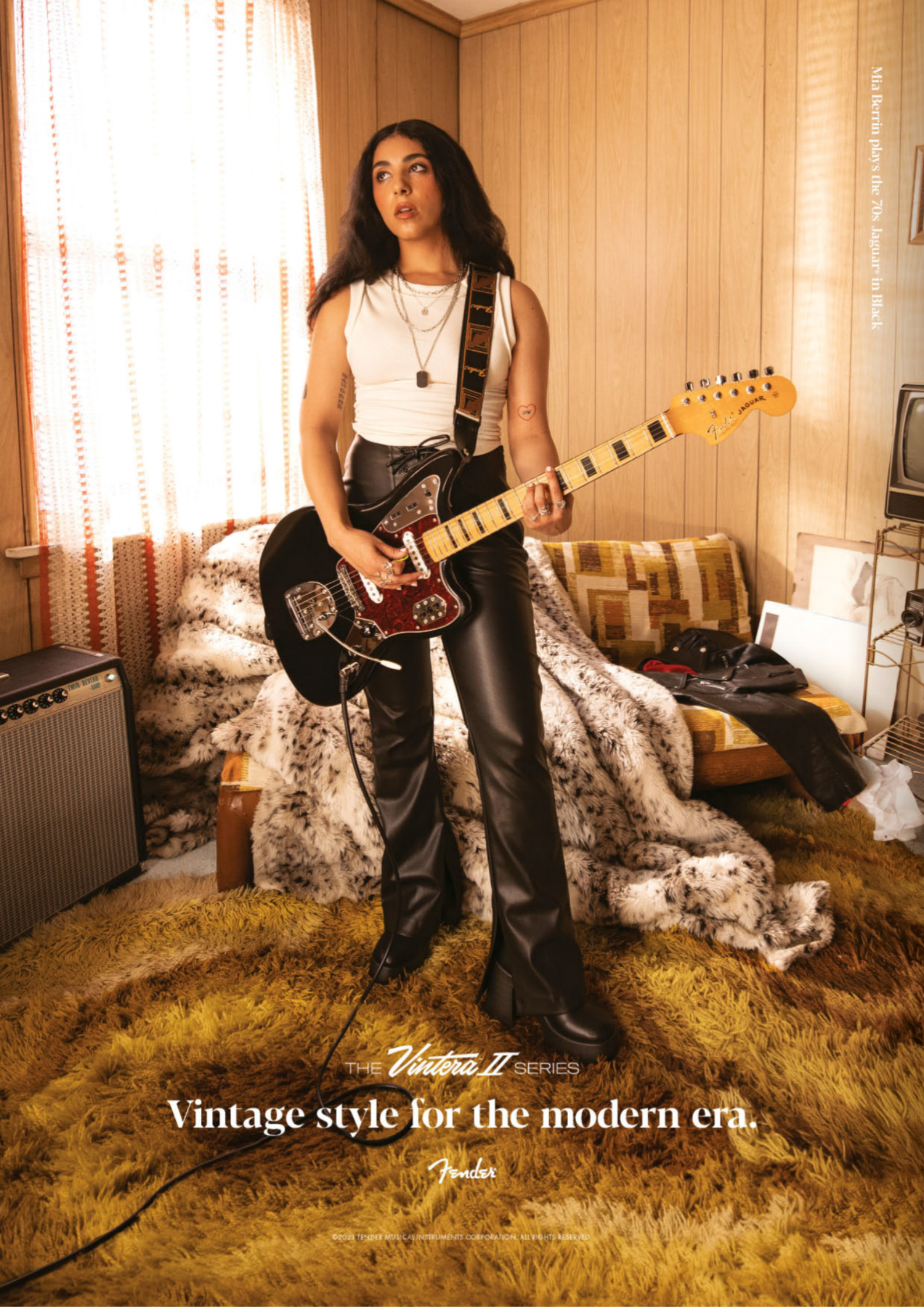
PRICE: £1,749 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Canada
TYPE: Thinline double-cutaway, electro nylon-string
TOP: Solid cedar
BACK: Chambered silver leaf maple
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Godin logo'd enclosed 14:1 ratio with plastic roller string posts
NUT: Graph Tech Tusq
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305mm (12") radius with face and side dot markers
FRETS: 22, medium
BRIDGE: Rosewood w/ compensated Tusq saddle
ELECTRICS: Godin/EPM Q-Discrete under-saddle system with top-mounted volume and tone controls
OPTIONS: Also available in Arctik Blue (£1,829)
RANGE OPTIONS: Another recent launch is the more 'crossover'-style Multiac Mundial (£1,629) with dual-source pickup system and choice of 4 colours
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Matte Black (as reviewed), Arctik Blue

John Hornby Skewes
0113 286 5381
http://godinguitars.com

8/10

PROS Smart lightweight build; strong output; simple controls; well-voiced tone control; a nylon-string for the electric player

CONS Narrow neck and string spacing will be too cramped for some; seems expensive


Mia Berrin plays the '70s Jaguar® in Black
THE Vintera II SERIES
Vintage style for the modern era.
Fender
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EVH FRANKENSTEIN RELIC
£1,479

WHAT IS IT? A stripe-less 'civilian' version of Eddie Van Halen's most famous creation

Some Kind Of Monster

One of the most distinctive electric guitars is back as another replica, but this time it's missing its main visual identifier. Double-cut eruption or paint job disruption?

Words Stuart Williams **Photography** Phil Barker

Hands up if you've ever tinkered with guitar mods. We'd wager that at some point or other we've all singed our fingers trying to replace a scratchy pot, turned the air blue as the spring from a pickup screw flies across the room for the third time, or gingerly winced as we make a twist of the Allen key. The late Eddie Van Halen was one such tinkerer, except his 'bitsa' mongrel became his implement for dropping jaws and raising the bar, permanently.

As such, you're most likely already very familiar with the Frankenstein, a guitar that completed Eddie's jigsaw of mind-melting lead work, telepathic rhythm abilities and groundbreaking manipulation of the instrument itself. Plus, it looked damn cool. "It wasn't a tape finish, I used tape to paint it that way," Eddie told us when we had the pleasure of visiting his 5150 studio in 2016. "I have no idea what possessed me to do that! I wish I did, but it's just one of those things. I have no fucking idea... and now I have a registered trademark on it."

The finish was just one element of the S-style guitar that Eddie was toting. Loaded with a single humbucker in the bridge position, there's been plenty of speculation as to what the original pickup actually was.

TONE

1. Eddie Van Halen helped to develop the Floyd Rose. As such, his preference was to mount the unit flush. This 1000 Series example can be detuned to drop D thanks to the addition of a D-Tuna. No adjustments needed!

2. Is it really a Frankenstein without the famous trademarked Stripe design? Yes, we'd have to argue that it is. If you want the trimmings of the Frankenstein without it being so obviously a tribute to king Edward, it checks all the boxes

3. Fender's Mexican factory is a dab-hand when it comes to convincing ageing at non-Custom Shop price points. Here, the body has some light relicing, front and back, and the neck is stained with Heavy Relic satin lacquer

"It's from a [Gibson ES-] 335. I painted [the 335] white because, of course, I fucked with that, too. But yeah, I yanked it out of there. I took the rear pickup out and it was really hard. I mean, I pretty much destroyed that guitar because you had the f-holes to get to the electronics. Man! Talk about a pain in the ass!"

Following years of homebrew replications by fans to incorporate the Frankenstein's many design points ('dummy' pickup, cavity-mounted switch, Floyd Rose, D-Tuna and so on), in 2007 Eddie teamed up with Fender's Custom Shop to build the first EVH-branded guitar. This came in the form of a dead-on 300-piece limited-edition tribute replica of the Frankenstein.

After we'd recovered from the shock of its price tag (used examples of this replica are commanding asking prices of £35,000 today), along came the EVH Striped Series models. These import Eddie-style guitars came with a core of the Frankenstein's features – albeit in pristine condition – before the EVH brand brought out the Striped Series Frankie in 2020. This time, we got a heavy-relic addition of the Striped Series models, with greater attention to detail, bringing most of the Frankenstein's stand-out features to those of us on everyday budgets.

Feel & Sounds

So that's it covered, then, the Frankenstein models are complete. Nope! Because here we have the Frankenstein Relic – a 'civilian' version of the Frankenstein that sees the basswood Strat body stripped of its stripes. In their place, there's a more understated, solid finish (available in three colour options: Red, White and Black), and given the name, there's no surprise that it's undergone some light punishment.

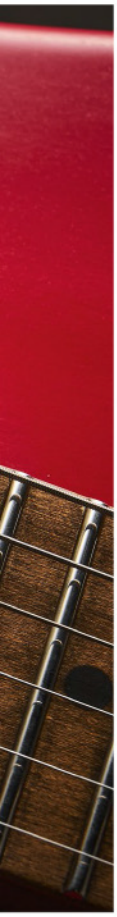
Elsewhere, everything is familiar and faithful to the EVH instrument blueprint. There's a quarter-sawn, graphite-reinforced maple neck, 22 jumbo-fret maple fingerboard with a 305mm to 406mm (12- to 16-inch) compound radius, a single EVH Wolfgang humbucker, a Floyd Rose and a D-Tuna. Also added to the guitar is the 'dummy' neck pickup we saw previously in the Frankie, as well as the 'dummy' five-way switch and custom cut-off scratchplate.

Why are we referring to it as 'dummy'? Well, that's what EVH calls it. But there's a twist: that dummy pickup isn't just a mute shell. It has wires fitted and neatly coiled (its DCR measures 6.8k), but they aren't connected to anything. Instead, they sit under the selector switch, which is screwed in place in the middle-position pickup cavity, and is also not connected. With our interests piqued a quick turn of the screwdriver reveals that the switch is, in fact, a Fender Pure Vintage model (which will set you back around £26 from Fender's website).

Under the scratchplate, there's a cavity tapering from 60mm at its widest point to 40mm at its narrowest, with around 33mm depth offering ample room for a full complement of controls. So, while we can't review it for 'what it could be', there is absolutely scope for adding to the format if you want to expand on the single humbucker and turn it into an HSS model.

We've experienced the EVH Wolfgang Humbucker on plenty of occasions before. It's punchy and obviously reacts well under higher gain settings, too, with harmonics sparking from the pick. The tinted neck looks the part (although our review model had some of the finish missing around the inside of the truss rod thumb-wheel recess), and compared with previous Frankensteins,

> The Frankenstein Relic is a 'civilian' version that sees the basswood Strat body stripped of its stripes



we'd say that the finish adds a little friction, especially after you've been playing a while. It's darker than some of EVH's stock photos show, and at the same time the fingerboard looks less grubbed-up in person than in the pictures, as much roasted effect as relic.

Talking of which, the neck profile is described as a 'modified C'. It's speedy but still has a slight chunk to it, and it's definitely not a super-modern shredder's neck. That's enhanced by the compound radius, which is noticeable but not overt, allowing for bigger bends without choking in the upper frets, even with our review model's fairly low action.

The Floyd Rose is installed flush, so you have the option to depress it until the strings are flapping like an optimistic emu. This is Eddie's preferred configuration; he insisted that the vibrato needs to be "all flush to the body. Everything needs to be connected... The more connection, the more sustain and resonance." The good news is that it returns to pitch and stays there effortlessly, and the addition of the D-Tuna is a handy one if you're regularly playing in drop D.

It's not often we give a shout-out to a volume pot, but if you're only going to equip a guitar with one (even if it is labelled 'tone'), then the EVH remains one of our favourites. It's fast, frictionless and allows for speedy violining effects to boot. The only criticism could be that its sensitive spin combined with its placement here might make it a little too easy to knock it by mistake, especially when reaching for the Floyd or palm-muting. But, as we've already noted, you could make use of those additional drill holes to move it.

Verdict

Once again, EVH has delivered a clutch of well-thought-out features. This should come as no surprise because it is essentially the same formula as the Striped Frankie version. It's a slight shame that there's no facility to split the coil for a little extra versatility (given that the pickup is four-conductor). But sticking with the spirit of this guitar – if its Charvel cousins are named Pro Mods, this could be thought of as a Pre-Mod – that's something that could be added to the list of DIY weekend jobs.

We were sceptical of why anyone would plump for this guitar without its defining visual feature, but the more you consider it, the more it makes sense. It's an EVH-themed guitar that has the potential to whisper 'Eddie Van Halen', rather than scream it. Apparently, a leopard can't change its spots, but it seems Eddie's monster can lose its stripes. G

EVH FRANKENSTEIN RELIC

PRICE: £1,479 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Double-cut solidbody electric
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Graphite reinforced, quartersawn maple, EVH modified C profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Floyd Rose locking/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot inlays, 305-406mm (12"-16") compound radius
FRETS: 22, jumbo
HARDWARE: Aged chrome Floyd Rose 1000 Series vibrato, EVH-branded Gotoh tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: EVH Wolfgang humbucker, 'dummy' (wired but not connected) Fender Strat vintage-style neck position single coil, Fender 5-way selector, volume control (labelled 'tone')
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.35/7.4
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: EVH Striped Series (£1,149), EVH Striped Series Frankie (£1,519), EVH Striped Series '78 Eruption (£1,299) and EVH Striped Series 5150 (£1,349)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Red (as reviewed), White, Black – all lacquer, relic finishes

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
01342 331700
www.evhgear.com

8/10

PROS An excellent playing and sounding 'classic' shred machine, bursting with plenty of useful features in Eddie's mould

CONS You'll need to make some additions to really get the most out of it, but at least the neck pickup and switch are included

ELECTRO-HARMONIX SPRUCE GOOSE
£129

WHAT IS IT? Overdrive pedal inspired by the Marshall Bluesbreaker

Golden Goose

We have a gander as Electro-Harmonix debuts its enhanced take on Marshall's Bluesbreaker overdrive sounds

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. You can select between three levels of input gain via the Lift switch, progressively hitting the drive circuit harder. The mid position provides 9dB of gain, while the high position provides 21dB

2. The Treble knob gradually increases the brightness, while the Bass knob offers a flat response at noon – so from there you can turn the bass up (clockwise) or down (counterclockwise)

3. The soft footswitch features both normal latching and momentary action. Each press-and-release will toggle between Bypass and Effect modes. Change is instantaneous, but if you press-and-hold it for more than half a second it will return to the previous state on release. Momentary action can be disabled if desired

The latest addition to EHX's extensive range of drive pedals, the Spruce Goose, is based on the pedal circuitry of Marshall's Bluesbreaker. Here, however, it extends the feature set beyond the recently reissued original to include a choice of three input gain settings, additional output and expanded EQ.

The pedal's input gain options are accessed via a Lift toggle switch that has low, medium and high settings that progressively hit the input to its drive circuitry harder. At its low setting, you can start with a nicely transparent clean boost with the Volume knob set to the high and lower settings of the Gain knob. Advancing the Gain knob will take you through some early break-up sounds and natural low-level drive.

The Bass and Treble knobs are wide ranging and can exert quite an influence on the overall tone, dialling in what you need to best suit your pickups and amp. The Bass is adept at adding a little girth to single coils, while the Treble knob needs to be set appropriately to match the Gain setting. Lower positions of the Gain knob benefit from upping the Treble knob, while advancing the Gain knob not only turns up the gain but increases top-end presence – something that you may wish to tone down. The low Lift setting may be reason enough to buy the pedal, but you also get medium and high positions that add 9dB and 21dB respectively, and the resultant extra gain and compression can usher in a range of driven amp tones for sustained singing leads.

The Spruce Goose stacks well with other pedals, too, with plenty of options in how you push things up a level, and there's a nice touch in the pedal's footswitch allowing momentary engagement of the effect as well as standard latching operation. While latching operation is carried out with a push-and-release until the switch clicks, you can just press it down to make the effect active for as long as you have your foot on it. Once you've got the controls set right, it can be useful for emphasising a passage or tipping things over the edge to generate harmonics/feedback.

Verdict

While plenty of pedals use the Marshall Bluesbreaker as a basis and evolve the design with extra facilities, the Spruce Goose's particular slant on that offers real flexibility at a manageable price point.

ELECTRO-HARMONIX SPRUCE GOOSE

PRICE: £129
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Drive pedal
FEATURES: Mechanical relay true bypass, latching/momentary footswitch action
CONTROLS: Volume, Gain, Bass, Treble, Lift switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or supplied 9V DC adaptor 20mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 72 (w) x 111 (d) x 50mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Practical size; selectable Lift options; solid EQ; momentary footswitch operation

CONS Nothing, unless you don't like the thought of removing four screws to change the battery...

3

THE RIVALS

If you can get on with the larger chassis, the newly reissued Marshall Bluesbreaker pedal (£139) is exactly the same as when it first appeared over 30 years ago, still with a little less output than modern interpretations of the pedal. Analog Man's King Of Tone is known as an evolved take on the Bluesbreaker; its progeny, the MXR Duke of Tone (£169), is neatly sized for pedalboards and offers three options via a toggle switch. For more outlay, there's the JHS Morning Glory V4 (£199) and the Wampler Pantheon (£199). If you're on a tight budget, the diminutive Mooer Blues Crab (£49) might suit.

Mooer's Blues Crab is an option for tight spaces and budgets

ACLAM THE MOCKER
£269

WHAT IS IT? Pedal based on the in-built fuzz of a vintage Vox UL730 amp

VOL
TONE
BIAS
THE MOCKER
aclam
1
2

Fab Four Fuzz

Following its Dr Robert pedal, Aclam revives a rare fuzz circuit from a vintage Vox amp used by The Beatles

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The Bias knob apparently adjusts the bias of the second transistor in the circuit and will take your fuzz from extreme gated, spluttery sounds through to something altogether smoother
2. Aclam says the grey Hammerite finish is a tribute to 1960s British fuzzboxes, while the graphics are inspired by The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*
3. Aclam pedals are equipped with the Smart Track Fastening System that facilitates easy fixing to its proprietary pedalboards. Other manufacturers' pedals can be fixed to an Aclam 'board with the company's 'Fast Fasteners'

Barcelona-based pedal company Aclam is continuing its quest to put specific sounds of yesteryear in pedals with The Mocker, another one with a Beatles connection. A couple of years back the company came up with the Dr Robert, a pedal that offered the sounds of the extremely rare Vox UL730 amp that The Beatles had supposedly used on various recordings at Abbey Road Studios, notably on the *Revolver* and *Sgt Pepper's* albums. While that pedal pretty much nailed the sound of the amp, there was one thing missing and that was the sound of the amp's in-built foot-switched distortion circuit – a typical 1960s fuzz. Now, the company has completed the task with The Mocker, a replica of that UL730 circuit, even down to using the same NOS Phillips OA200 diodes as the original.

The pedal follows the original amp's 'on or off' effect to an extent in that the amount of fuzz is fixed. However, this iteration of the circuitry has plenty of scope for dialling in sonic variations with added Bias and Tone knobs. A Volume knob sets the overall output of the pedal and anywhere over its 10 o'clock position will give you a volume boost. The Tone knob doesn't do anything too radical but operates in a practical musical range, adjusting the top-end presence and matching the pedal to whatever amp you're using.

Things get interesting when it comes to the Bias knob. From around its 9 o'clock position through to fully clockwise, you get a conventional fuzz sound with subtle variations along the dial, mainly in feel and note attack. It's a nice amount of fuzz – smooth and sustain-y, with very good clean-up characteristics putting you in complete control with your guitar's volume knob. For those who like something a little more raucous, below that 9 o'clock position we start to get into gated sounds, changing by degree from textural grittiness to absolute spluttery mayhem at its minimum position.

Verdict

As always, we welcome the revival of any notable guitar effect from the past, and while the UL730 fuzz ranks fairly high on the obscurity scale, it is a sound that has pedigree as there's a Beatles connection via the fuzz circuitry being an integral part of the UL730 and other UL-series amps that the band had access to. The Fabs connection aside, this is an excellent fuzz in its own right.

ACLAM
THE MOCKER

PRICE: £269
ORIGIN: Spain
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: Relay true bypass, Smart Track pedalboard mounting, soft-touch footswitch
CONTROLS: Volume, Tone, Bias, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 12mA
DIMENSIONS: 137 (w) x 88 (d) x 55mm (h)

Aclam Guitars
www.aclamguitars.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Revives a rare sound from the past; good clean-up characteristics; practical Tone knob range; Bias knob offers flexible sonic variations

CONS The Smart Track Fastening System makes the pedal a little bigger than some might like

THE RIVALS

While The Mocker recreates Vox amp fuzz in a pedal, its salient point is the range available by having adjustable Bias on the front panel, so let's have a look at a few others with that feature, rather than anything specifically named as 'Vox-flavoured': JHS's 3 Series Fuzz (£99) is a two-transistor fuzz with a Bias knob and switchable bass boost; DOD's Carcosa (£129) is a silicon fuzz featuring an After knob that affects the bias and gain of its third transistor; and Keeley's Fuzz Bender (£149) is a three-transistor modern fuzz using a combination of silicon and germanium, and featuring a Bias knob alongside powerful active EQ.

DOD says its Carcosa's After knob has "powerful biasing"

the Wishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Gibson J-45 Custom & SJ-200 Custom £4,799 & £8,799

CONTACT **Gibson** WEB **www.gibson.com** WORDS **Neville Marten** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

Gibson has always produced the handsomest acoustic guitars. From rich-toned sunbursts to models boasting all manner of cosmetic finery, they surely are some of the coolest stage acoustics of all time. Within its electric line, the company has continually created upmarket versions of otherwise 'Standard' models, including the Les Paul and SG Custom, and the ES-355 to which the same fancy appointments and materials were applied, such as pearl, gold and ebony. There are now Flying V and Explorer Customs sporting the same livery, too. However, until now, the acoustic range has escaped these tuxedo-like upgrades. But all-new for 2024 come four flat-tops: the SJ-200 Custom, J-45 Custom, Hummingbird Custom and Songwriter EC Custom, the former pair as featured here.

The premise is simple: take a standard acoustic model, replace its rosewood fingerboard with a bound ebony one sporting block mother-of-pearl markers, apply a multiple-bound headstock overlay with 'split H' motif, fit gold-plated Grover tuners, a black pickguard edged in white, and then finish it in glorious ebony nitro. On the SJ-200 Custom the rosewood moustache bridge becomes ebony, and the J-45 Standard's inverted rosewood 'belly' bridge switches to that timber, too. Also, they each sport truss rod covers with 'Custom' engraved in white script. While the SJ-200's usual look could be described as rather busy and the J-45's relatively plain in contrast, the Custom treatment elevates them both in different ways.

Structurally, both instruments retain their original integrity, so under the SJ-200's gloss black lacquer lurks a lightly figured maple back and sides, a two-piece maple neck with walnut centre 'stringer', and Sitka spruce top. Similarly, our J-45 Custom retains its solid mahogany body and neck, plus traditional spruce top. Both instruments carry LR Baggs' excellent Session VTC pickup/preamp with soundhole-mounted volume and tone rotaries and under-saddle Element pickup.

Sometimes referred to pejoratively as the 'whispering giant', certain-era J-200s were indeed known for their underwhelming voice, given their overwhelming size. Lately, though, that all seems to have changed. Our ebony Custom here is, in fact, a bit of a bruiser, belting out huge bass response with matching mids and highs. It's beautifully balanced, and the well-considered action is perfect for what the SJ-200 does best – big strummed chords. Of course, artists such as Jimmy Page and Yusuf/Cat Stevens have both used them to create delicate fingerpicked pieces, too, but most players wouldn't choose such a guitar for that main purpose.

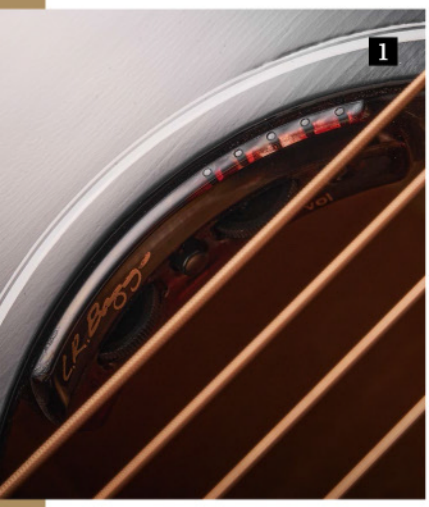
The J-45 Custom is a powerful-sounding beast, too, and due to its more manageable dimensions would probably suit more players overall. It also does the strummy thing brilliantly, but it beats its big brother as a fingerstylist's friend since the bass is slightly reduced, making it a tad less boomy.

You might say it's horses for courses and you'd make your decision based on the above criteria... but when we tell you that the J-45 Custom costs exactly £4,000 less than its larger sibling (and we can't exactly see why), that's likely to tip the balance. Nevertheless, pricing aside, we must congratulate Gibson here as we love the concept of giving its acoustics the Custom treatment. Plus, we can't fault their build, finishing or general attention to detail. And were Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash or Gene Vincent still around, it's likely they'd be playing one or other of these superb machines today. Be-Bop-A-Lula, indeed! G

1. This is the J-45 Custom, but in fact both instruments feature LR Baggs' excellent Session VTC preamp with Element under-saddle pickup. Mounted discreetly here are volume and tone controls, as well as battery check and phase inverter push switches, the latter there to help eliminate feedback

2. Both guitars also carry Grover M6 Rotomatic tuning machines with their famous 'milk bottle' shaped shank. Gibson often used Grovers on Les Pauls, SGs and such, in place of the more common Kluson waffleback style. They were also the standard 'upgrade' for Gibsons in the 60s and 70s

3. Our SJ-200 Custom's bridge is the 'moustache' style, here in ebony instead of the model's more usual rosewood. This guitar features two mother-of-pearl bars, as opposed to the four bars found on early SJ-200s and Custom Shop vintage reissues. Note, too, the plain black pickguard edged in white (no hand-painted flowers and berries)



4. Seeing the J-45 and SJ-200 Customs side by side, the differences in size and shape become obvious, the SJ-200's jumbo body a voluptuous 431.8mm (17 inches) across the lower bout compared with the J-45's lesser 412.75mm (16.25 inches). Gibson's round-shouldered dreadnought shape was also markedly different from the square look of Martin's mahogany D-18, its lifelong rival, while of the earlier American acoustic makers, only Guild's F-50 matched the SJ-200 inch for inch

5. Although the lighting in our pictures makes the guitars appear flat black, they are in fact high gloss. Manufacturers of acoustics often shy away from ebony (as Gibson has always referred to it), as it's notoriously hard to do well. Since the entire instrument's binding will need to be scraped back (or, as some makers do these days, masked up), if it's not done with 100 per cent accuracy the guitar winds up looking scruffy. Thankfully, both our Gibsons are finished perfectly

THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

NAMM 2024 Round-Up

Last issue, we brought you a few previews of new gear for 2024 and now, with the dust settled on Anaheim's NAMM Show, there's a whole lotta gassin' going on at *Guitarist* HQ. From long-anticipated signature guitars to the return of classic vintage models, and even some reimagining going on, there's new gear emerging across a range of price points for this year, and we're just scratching the surface. Here are just some of the most exciting new releases that'll be hitting the shelves in the months to come. **[SW]**

CÓRDOBA STAGE TRADITIONAL CD **£624**
2023's Córdoba Stage brought us feedback-free, nylon-string sounds in a crossover 'nylon-string for electric players' format. Now, as the name suggests, traditional nylon players can enjoy the same benefits. The Stage Traditional features a chambered solid mahogany body, topped with solid cedar. The fingerboard is flat rosewood and the nut width is a flamenco-friendly 52mm, with a 12th-fret body join. Inside, it's home to the Córdoba/Fishman Stage Pickup System, which uses an under-saddle piezo and body sensor combination, the latter of which can be blended in via a dedicated control. It comes with a recycled nylon gigbag and is available now.
www.cordobaguitars.com

THIRD MAN DONNER TRIPLE THREAT & **THIRD MAN** DIY FUZZ **£95 & £68**
Jack White has shocked tone snobs worldwide by teaming up with affordable gear brand Donner via his own Third Man Hardware brand for the Triple Threat, an all-analogue multi-effects unit priced at just £95. Inside the pedal are Distortion, Phaser and Echo circuits, with a full set of controls (volume, gain and tone for Distortion; level, rate and depth for Phaser; level, feedback and time for Echo).

Third Man Hardware has also announced its new Fuzz-a-Tron DIY fuzz pedal kit (£68). This two-knob fuzz kit includes everything you need to build the pedal (including the enclosure) and is aimed at beginner builders, requiring "little or no soldering experience".
uk.donnermusic.com

EPIPHONE DAVE GROHL **£1,249**
Foo Fighters' frontman has long been associated with the Pelham Blue DG-335, based on his red Trini Lopez, which has been used on every Foos album to date. While eye-wateringly expensive Gibson versions have been available in limited quantities, fans of The Nicest Man In Rock can now get their hands on an Epiphone version. Priced at £1,249, it features a layered maple body with a one-piece mahogany neck and Indian laurel fingerboard. Visually, it looks faithful, with the split-diamond inlays, diamond-shaped f-holes and a six-in-line headstock. Electronically, it's packing Gibson USA Burstbuckers and, of course, it's sporting a Dave Grohl signature on the rear of the headstock.
www.epiphone.com

LERXST ALEX LIFESON LIMELIGHT **$3,999**
Former Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson has partnered with Godin to produce his first ever signature model under his Lerxst brand, which has focused on amps until now. The Lerxst Limelight takes its inspiration from Lifeson's Hentor Sportscaster double-cut, which he used in the 80s. The Limelight features a swamp ash body, maple neck and ebony fingerboard. It comes stocked with custom-wound Mojotone pickups in an HSS configuration, wired to a three-way toggle and master volume/tone controls, and we get a choice of a Floyd Rose or Vega Trem for the vibrato. There's no word on UK retailers just yet, but the guitar is listed on both Lerxst's and Godin's websites.
www.lerxstamps.com

BLACKSTAR ID:CORE V4 **From £139**
Blackstar's ID:Core series has been updated to its fourth generation, further solidifying its place as a go-to practice amp with 10-watt (£139), 20-watt (£179) and 40-watt (£215) models on offer. Loaded with six amp models (Clean Warm, Clean Bright, Crunch, Super Crunch, OD1 and OD2), and 12 effects split into three sections (Modulation, Delay and Reverb), the ID:Core V4 also boasts Blackstar's impressive and immersive Super Wide Stereo. Blackstar has added its CabRig speaker emulation and compatibility with its Architect editing software, while the USB connection has been upgraded to USB C for greater bandwidth. We'll have a full review next issue.
www.blackstaramps.com

EVH SA-126 SPECIAL **From £1,449**
The semi-acoustic Wolfgang Van Halen has been using for the past few years will be available to buy from May. The SA-126 takes its name from Eddie's birthday and comes in two flavours, complete with 'E' hole: SA-126 Special (top, in Matte Army Drab or Stealth Black, £1,449) and SA-126 Special QM (in Tobacco Sunburst and Transparent Purple, £1,499). Both have a bolt-on mahogany neck (305 to 406mm/12- to 16-inch compound radius ebony 'board; 628mm/24.75-inch scale length) and chambered mahogany body with basswood centre block. The regular Special is capped with maple; it's quilted maple on the QM. You get Tim Shaw-designed EVH SA-126 'buckers, a harmonica bridge and triple-block inlays.
www.evhgear.com

GRETSCH ELECTROMATIC PRISTINE LTD **From £649**
"Clean, elegant and powerful," says Gretsch of its new Limited Edition Electromatic Pristine models. And based on how they look, we're agreeing. The Jet Single-Cut With Bigsby (£649, chambered mahogany with maple top) and Center Block Double-Cut With Bigsby (£849, laminated mahogany with a spruce centre block) are decked-out in two-tone metallic finishes dripping with gold. The Jet Single-Cut has Filter'Tron FT-5E pickups, while the Center Block Double-Cuts is fitted with P-90E pickups, and both feature a thin U-shaped neck profile. According to Gretsch, all this adds up to "uncompromising Gretsch power and fidelity in stunning style".
www.gretschguitars.com

GIBSON FALCON 5 & FALCON 20 **£TBC**
Gibson may have acquired Mesa/Boogie in 2021, but it's known a thing or two about amp-making for almost a century. Inspired by their 60s namesakes, these models have all-new circuits developed by Randall Smith himself and are made in Petaluma, California (home to Mesa/Boogie). The Falcon 5 offers seven watts (switchable to three) of power from a 6V6 output valve (swappable for 6L6), a 10-inch Jensen Blackbird 40 speaker and a valve-driven spring reverb circuit. The Falcon 20 has a dual 6V6 power section (12, 5 or 1-watt modes, 6L6 compatible), a 12-inch Jensen Blackbird 40, plus a valve tremolo circuit alongside the spring reverb.
www.gibson.com

The Lineup

GUILD POLARA SERIES **From £519**
Last year, Guild finally brought out signature versions of its Polara model for the guitar's biggest proponent, Soundgarden's Kim Thayil. Now, it's gone big with its revered double-cut with not one but three non-signature models (above, left to right): the Polara (£519), single-pickup Polara Night Edition (£565) and Polara Deluxe (£649). All three feature mahogany bodies and mahogany set necks with rosewood fingerboards. They also feature Guild's new HB-2+ humbuckers: these are modernised versions of the oversized HB-1 and come uncovered on the Polara, covered on the Deluxe model – which also adds a bound fingerboard, block inlays, coil-splitting and a Guild compensated stopbar.
www.guildguitars.com

MARTIN X SERIES **From £599**
Martin has "remastered" its affordable X Series acoustics with a number of improvements to make them even better value for money. The new X Series range includes X1 and X2 versions in 0, 00, 000, D and GPC shapes, as well as six-string and 12-string models. Starting with new HPL (High Pressure Laminate) patterns, there are some exotic-looking examples including cocobolo, ziricote and Brazilian rosewood – with matching headstocks – joining the line-up. Elsewhere, Martin has made some playability tweaks, with a thinner fingerboard, "refined string spacing" and a contoured bridge for added comfort. Electronics come courtesy of Martin's E1 system. The range is available now.
www.martinguitar.com

ESP LTD ECLIPSE EC-01FT & EC-201FT **£1,109 & £499**
Think of a single-pickup, flat-top single-cut and your mind might not instantly head towards purveyors of modern metal LTD. But single-pickup guitars are looking like a trend for 2024 and LTD is jumping straight in with its EC-01FT (top, £1,109) and EC-201FT (£499) models. They both follow a similar design, with mahogany bodies, thin U-shaped necks and a single humbucker. Upgrades on the EC-01FT include a set-through neck, ebony fingerboard and exclusive Seymour Duncan Custom 14 humbucker; both guitars feature coil-splits via the lone master volume control. Each model comes in Black, with Olympic White and Vintage Burst (EC-01FT) and See Thru Black Cherry (EC-201FT) options.
www.espguitars.com

POSITIVE GRID SPARK LINK & SPARK CONTROL X **£129 & £139**
Positive Grid is making the Spark range even more convenient with the addition of two wireless accessories. The first, Spark LINK (£129), is a wireless system (a standalone product that works with any amp) offering 24-bit/48kHz transmission, with a frequency response of 20Hz to 20kHz. The transmitter and receiver combo can work across four channels for multiple units in one environment, is USB-rechargeable and lasts for six hours. Next up is the Spark Control X (£139), a wireless footswitch offering six assignable buttons for patch selection, effects switching, backing track start/stop and more. The LEDs are colour-coded for easy recognition, and thanks to the dual TRS inputs you can also connect a pair of expression pedals.
uk.positivegrid.com

SQUIER LIMITED EDITION CLASSIC VIBE '60S MODELS
From £419

Squier's much-loved Classic Vibe series has been given an update with a trio of Limited Edition '60s-inspired six-strings. The Squier Classic Vibe '60s Stratocaster HSS (£419; Sienna Sunburst and Lake Placid Blue), '60s Custom Telecaster (£429; Dakota Red) and '60s Telecaster SH (£419; Black and Sherwood Green with matching headstocks), all feature poplar bodies and maple necks, with Indian laurel fingerboards on the Strat and Tele SH (maple on the Custom). Similarly, all three are outfitted with Fender-designed Alnico pickups: HSS configuration for the Strat, two single coils on the Custom Telecaster and SH on the, er, SH model.
www.fender.com

VOX HAND-WIRED SERIES & WAHS **£TBC**

Vox has been delving into its heritage to come up with recreations of some of its best-loved gear. First up is the new Hand-Wired series, a seven-strong collection of amps that is the result of detailed dissection of original golden-age AC15 and AC30 designs. Vox has gone back to the drawing board with the transformers, power circuit and even the thinner cabinet design to bring the Hand-Wired models as close as possible to the sound of the 60s with a selection of AC4, AC10, AC15 and AC30 models. Similarly, the UK brand has produced reissues of its wah pedals with the VRM-1 Real McCoy and V846 Vintage models both using "hand-selected and custom-designed parts" to make them "as they were".
www.voxamps.com

ALSO OUT NOW...

EASTMAN D'AMBROSIO FROM £3,299

Eastman has made the surprise announcement of its US-made D'Ambrosio range, named after Eastman master luthier and head of design, Otto D'Ambrosio. The new series features three categories – left to right: Single Cut (£3,299), Double Cut (£3,499 to £3,599) and Offset (£3,599) – with variations in each category making this a 10-strong line-up. Key to all models is the new FullerTone neck join, which uses what Eastman claims is a completely new long-tenon joint, coupled with machine-threaded screws that lock into steel anchors embedded in the neck. The result, says Eastman, is three times greater neck-to-body contact. The body woods have been responsibly and sustainably sourced, using wildfire-burned reclaimed pine and southern swamp ash, along with Madagascar rosewood for the fingerboards. With pickups from Lollar throughout the variants, the Single Cut and Double Cut models are also available with Eastman's new Kingtone Classic tone switch. Eastman reckons it will achieve "tones you didn't know your guitar could make".
www.eastmanguitars.com

YAMAHA PACIFICA PROFESSIONAL & PACIFICA STANDARD PLUS £2,399 & £1,399

In a surprise move, Yamaha has lifted the lid on two new Pacifica ranges, both taking the longstanding workhorse into a higher end area of the market. The Japanese-made Pacifica Professional (below top, £2,399) includes the PACP12 and PACP12M models, while the PACS+12 and PACS+12M are in the lower-priced Pacifica Standard Plus category (£1,399), designated by their rosewood or maple fingerboards. Yamaha has tweaked the design of the alder bodies, as well as adding stainless-steel frets and a contoured neck heel (with a compound-radius fingerboard on the Professional model), with tuners and vibratos from Gotoh. The electronics are also new, designed in collaboration with Rupert Neve Designs; the Reflectone pickups are offered in an HSS format across the board, with coil-splitting for the humbucker on all models.
uk.yamaha.com

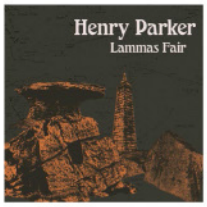
THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: Henry Parker

Album: Lammas Fair (Cup And Ring Records)



On second album, *Lammas Fair*, Henry adds a 60s psychedelic edge to his folky sounds **henryparkermusic.co.uk**

Yorkshireman Henry Parker is a flourishing singer-songwriter and has recently hit his stride with *Lammas Fair*, his second album, following on from 2019's *Silent Spring*. He was also entrusted by Tompkins Square label owner, Josh Rosenthal, to curate a compilation – *Imaginational Anthem Vol. XII: I Thought I Told You* – dedicated to the much-missed guitarist Michael Chapman. "When I got to 10 years old I realised the guitar was something I really enjoyed doing," he tells us of how his guitar journey started. "By the end of primary school I was listening to bands like Saxon and Iron Maiden and I'd really caught the bug."

To The Other Side

It was several years later that Henry moved from his early metal interests to more folk-based music. "I was at uni studying popular music broadly," he explains. "As a teenager I kept up the heavy metal infatuation – and I still like lots of it, but I'm more picky now. I thought then that folk music was just G, C and D strumming, but then I heard Martin Simpson and thought, 'Wow! I didn't realise you could be a virtuoso folk guitarist.' That really caught my attention, so I got into it from the guitar playing side; now, it's just this huge rabbit warren of discovery. The Bert Jansch and Nick Drake period feels like a real heyday of steel-string players."

PHOTO BY ROBIN ZAHLER

English heavy metallers like Saxon and Iron Maiden inspired Henry in his formative years until he found folk's answer to the virtuoso in Martin Simpson

In Praise Of Davey Graham

When it comes to influential albums, Henry is quick to mention one in particular: "I'm constantly going back to Davey Graham's *Folk, Blues And Beyond*," he says. "It's one I got into really early, one of the first folk albums I really listened to. It's amazing what he was doing and I feel he is massively neglected as an insanely creative player. For me, he's like Jimi Hendrix and I think all of his stuff should be written out and analysed in forensic detail. I've learned a couple of Davey Graham tunes, like *Leaving Blues*; I was learning loads from transcribing that and it was only a few months ago. I was slowing down the recording and learning lots about how he does things."

Folk Meets Psychedelia

As for Henry's own work, his second album, *Lammas Fair*, sees the guitarist take a leap forward from *Silent Spring* as he brings a more psychedelic edge to his sound. "I really enjoyed discovering the interweaving happening in 60s London," he smiles. "Bands like Pink Floyd, The Incredible String Band and Soft Machine. It was folk meets prog meets psyche, which is the well I want to draw from. I like to do stuff that's traditional folk that morphs into something more leftfield and psychedelic. With my first album, you could hear the Nick Drake and Ryley Walker influences. But on *Lammas Fair*, it feels like my sound and the music I'm writing now is maintaining that."

Tuned In

Upon flicking through the *Lammas Fair* liner notes, it's clear Henry is a fan of the classic album information; his notes include song explanations and, importantly, tunings. "I always enjoyed that on records, and I try to make albums that I would find interesting," he nods. "As for tunings, I've explored DADGAD the most and know it almost as well as standard now. But I'm not a player who thinks DADGAD should be played in any key; I'm only going to play it in a key of D, whether it's major or minor. I don't see the point of chasing some B♭ major key. I like to make the most out of the resonant strings; it brings out the best in the guitar." **[GK]**

Standout track: *Death And The Lady*
For fans of: Bert Jansch, Davey Graham, The Incredible String Band, Ryley Walker

IMAGINATIONAL ANTHEM VOL. XII

Fellow Yorkshire artists pay tribute to Michael Chapman

The passing of beloved Yorkshire guitarist Michael Chapman in 2021 left a dent in the folk and acoustic music world. Tompkins Square Records decided a compilation was in order and put Henry in charge of the track choices, resulting in a cracking varied set in *Imaginational Anthem Vol. XII*. "It's good to see it come together, it's been a year in the making," he says. "I thought it would be really nice to have it Yorkshire focused and I've played gigs with nearly everyone on there [including Katie Spencer, Bobby Lee and Dean McPhee], so there's a nice communal feel to it."

PHOTO BY WILL KILLEN

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

Philip Sayce's powerful new album is imbued with 70s-era classic rock

PHOTO BY IAN FRASER

Philip Sayce

The Wolves Are Coming

Forty Below Records (available now)

10/10

Strat-wielding blues-rocker's album punches hard

For high-energy blues-rock fans, Philip Sayce takes some beating. His Fender Strat's battered appearance is testament to how strong a player he is with the ability to bend, hammer and pick with blazing fireworks through to the softest of ballad-serving touches. *The Wolves Are Coming* is a masterful presentation of strong songs played with passion and stunning guitar tones. Not afraid to divulge his influences, Philip told us in issue 508 that his sights are set firmly on the era of classic rock: "[Take] Robin Trower, for instance: when I hear live recordings of those guys in the mid-70s... there's something about the earth under my feet moving."

Opener, *That Bitches Brew*, is a stomping Hendrix-esque burner, filled with heavy riffing and big dynamics. Huge. The swinging swagger of *Lady Love Divine* has an infectious chorus and a stinging solo, while *Babylon Is Burning* features guitar and vocal unison melodies and great rhythmic punches. Wah-guitar drives *Your Love* with a mid-tempo groove, a party-like chorus and a Uni-Vibe coloured solo. Next, you'll experience sonic chill-out from *It's Over Now* with tasty Curtis Mayfield *Little Wing*-styled guitar chording. For the album's most blazing solo, check out *Blackbirds Fly Alone*; don't be fooled by the intro's acoustic strumming – Philip's electric double-time chops are full-on for the outro.

Overall, the album has a nostalgic, late 60s/early 70s feel with a production that sounds both powerful and organic. For blues-rock fans, this has to be one of the most must-hear albums for 2024. It's that good! **[JS]**

Standout track: *Babylon Is Burning*
For fans of: Jimi Hendrix, Robin Trower

It Bites FD

Live From The Black Country

Magenta (available now)

9/10

Francis Dunnery helms new It Bites live album

It Bites was a UK prog band from the late 80s, fronted by Francis Dunnery who released three albums that championed great songs and musicianship. Decades later, Francis presents a new version of the band (he's the only original in the six-member line-up here) with this live release filmed and recorded in Wolverhampton. The riff-heavy *All In Red* and the rocking *Positively Animal*, plus the diminished-tinged lines within *Sister Sarah* and the beautiful guitar lead lines on *Leaving Without You* are just the tip of the iceberg, not to mention the fan fave instrumental *Charlie*, a pretty chord-tapping marvel using FD's unique tapboard and an echo. As for the prog-tastic *Once Around The World*, the nearly 17-minute presentation is a rich journey that demonstrates Genesis to Allan Holdsworth influences as well as the ability to shift stylistic gears with virtuosic precision. Roll on the new It Bites FD album! **[JS]**

Standout track: *Charlie*
For fans of: Genesis, 1980s It Bites

John Smith

The Living Kind

Commoner/Thirty Tigers (available 15 March)

9/10

Seventh solo release from master singer-songwriter

When your album racks up over 100 million plays on Spotify, you can be fairly certain you've found your niche as a performer. Such is the case for John Smith, whose sixth album, *The Fray*, not only scored highly on the infamous streaming site but also proved immensely popular in the physical sales division, too. Teaming up with producer Joe Henry, John began writing *The Living Kind* in early 2022 and recorded mainly live at Henry's studio in Maine last year. The album is a gloriously intimate portrait of a songwriter at the peak of his powers. The guitars include vintage pieces belonging to the studio, Smith's beloved Fylde acoustics and his new discovery, Mule electrics. Opener, *Candle*, sets the mood, with tracks like *Trick Of The Light* and *Lily* as notable highlights. Watch out for live UK dates later this year. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Lily*
For fans of: John Martyn, Richard Thompson

Steve Hackett returns with a rich concept album drenched in his signature riffs

PHOTO BY TINA KORHONEN

Steve Hackett

The Circus And The Nightwhale

InsideOut Music (available now)

8/10

Prog-flavoured concept album from ex-Genesis axeman

Steve Hackett currently balances his live dates between performing the early material from his former Genesis bandmates interspersed with material from his solo years. And with Genesis Revisited doing extremely good business on the worldwide stage, it makes perfect sense to keep the home fires burning by frequently refreshing the newer material. Such is the case with *The Circus And The Nightwhale*, a rich concept album featuring the trials and tribulations of a character called Travla. In typical Hackett fashion it's a luscious, orchestrated affair featuring signature heavy guitar riffs (think *Squonk* from the Genesis album *Trick Of The Tail*) and moody ballads, as with *Found And Lost* here. The prog element is never far away from Steve's fretboard, as with *Enter The Ring*, and his signature melodic soloing is present throughout. It's maybe his most ambitious project to date – and it's an absolute stunner. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Enter The Ring*
For fans of: Genesis, Mike And The Mechanics

Ultrasonic Grand Prix

Instafuzz

Non-Delux (available now)

8/10

Sleazy, cinematic brilliance from Little Barrie and Shawn Lee

As the man behind the theme tune to *Better Call Saul,* Barrie Cadogan (aka Little Barrie) is no stranger to utilising the guitar as Ennio Morricone did, as an instrument of barbed suspense and jagged grandeur. And, in fact, there's just a touch of sleazy Italian cinema about this album, in which retro synth grooves are juxtaposed with Barrie's flick-knife sharp guitar hooks. Barrie's partner in crime, multi-instrumentalist Shawn Lee of Young Gun Silver Fox, brings flashes of Americana into the equation, his vocals sounding like exortations from the pulpit by a travelling preacher. It's a heady and intriguing cocktail, but, for the most part, it hangs together surprisingly easily and the overall effect is like sitting in the back row of an all-night cinema in 1980s Milan – edgy, cool, sleazy and more than a little dark. Check it out. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Seamoon Rising*
For fans of: Link Wray, Giorgio Moroder, Vic Flick

THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

Scott Henderson returns with a new instrumental album that fuses his rock, blues and jazz-influenced backgrounds seamlessly

Artist: Scott Henderson

Album: Karnevel! (Mango Prom Music)

Scott Henderson's seventh solo release follows 2019's *People Mover* and takes its name from the title track's "creepy and fun" vibe

Since playing with jazz fusion legends Chick Corea and Joe Zawinul, Scott Henderson has carved out a reputation as one of the most formidable yet melodically eloquent electric guitarists around. He joins us to discuss his new instrumental album.

Tell us about the song that gave the album its name – did it set the tone for the project?

"Well, I don't name songs before I write them. I just listen to the songs after I write them. And sometimes it takes a long time to figure out titles. But that particular song reminded me of a carnival – there's this particular moment in that song where there's like a double snare that sounds kind of like a horse-trot. That reminded me of horses and, I don't know, for some reason that translated into horses in a carnival. I thought the whole song had kind of got some creepy moments but also some fun moments. And that's what a carnival is: creepy and fun."

Your style seamlessly blends hard rock with virtuosic jazz influences. What musical experiences first opened up your ears to those possibilities?

"I grew up playing rock, basically rock and blues influenced by Led Zeppelin and Hendrix and Deep Purple and that whole world. So I guess the very first time that happened to me was when I just luckily got a gig with an all-black group, a big 10-piece horn band. I was the only white kid and I was completely clueless about that kind of music because they were playing James Brown, Kool & The Gang, all the Motown stuff, Tower Of Power, Earth, Wind & Fire. I was just completely lost; I had no idea what to do. Luckily, one of the horn players was a pretty good rhythm guitar player and he showed me – basically gave me guitar lessons on how to play guitar in that style because they liked my blues playing and they thought it would be cool to have a guitar player that can play solos because they'd never had one before. So I was okay when it came to playing some bluesy solos, but I had no idea how to comp, how to play rhythm.

"But over the next few years that I played with them, I grew to love that music as much as I loved rock. And that changed me as a musician. I thought, 'Well, gee, so I can have an equal love for rock and R&B and funk.' It just totally changed me then – through bands like Earth, Wind & Fire and Tower Of Power, where there were jazzy solos and chords and harmony that I'd never heard before. That got me into bands like Weather Report and other stuff – Mahavishnu Orchestra, Chick Corea – people that were combining rock and jazz.

"At that point, I don't think I was ready to listen to straight-ahead jazz. But after I listened to fusion for a while, I realised that those guys came from straight-ahead jazz and I started listening to Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Joe Henderson – all the straight-ahead greats. I got really involved in that music for a long time, playing all the standards from the *Real Book* and Wayne Shorter's music and stuff like that.

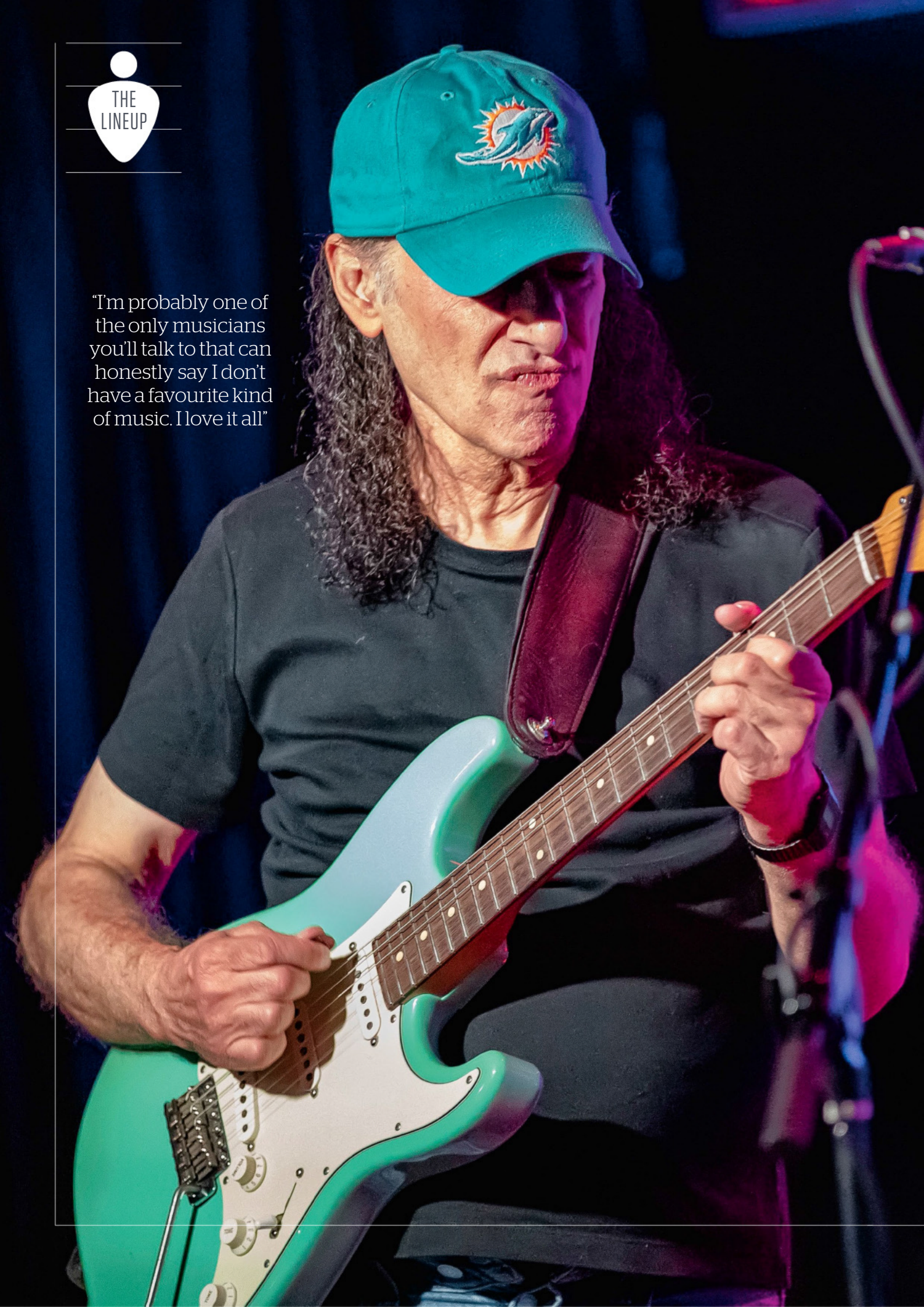
"I've just been lucky to get exposed to a lot of different kinds of music. And I'm probably one of the only musicians you'll talk to that can honestly say I don't have a favourite kind of music. I love it all, it's all great."

Scott's signature series Suhr has the feel of a vintage Strat but with the convenience of an easy playing 16-inch fingerboard radius

In your incredible soloing, you rarely settle squarely on a note – you usually slightly bend or slur the tail of each note in a very vocal way. How did you develop that style?

"I think I probably always did it a little bit. I guess in the last few years I've been doing it more... and it's funny how some people think that I'm using the whammy bar all the time. If they heard me play live, they would see that I'm not using it as much as they think because

"I grew to love [R&B and funk] music as much as I loved rock. And that changed me as a musician. Then I started listening to fusion and to straight-ahead jazz"



"I'm probably one of the only musicians you'll talk to that can honestly say I don't have a favourite kind of music. I love it all"

I'm doing a lot of that stuff with my fingers and just sliding around on the fretboard and bending strings and stuff that may sound like the whammy bar but actually isn't. But it does come from listening to vocalists. I mean, that's all I can say. It comes from listening to slide guitar players, horn players and vocalists because they all do that thing where every note has a little bit of grease on it."

In jazz guitar the licks are typically melodic, guided by the song's underlying chord changes. But you find in some instrumental rock that soloing is sometimes treated as an end in itself, with songs a generic canvas to shred over.

"To me, that's kind of sad, you know, because I think it sort of glorifies virtuosity over musicality. I'm not into it myself. Not that there aren't some great guitar players... like Eddie Van Halen was a really great guitar player, virtuoso for sure, but also very musical. And not many of the guys who try to play that way... they get the chops, but they don't often get the soul and that's what I'm missing sometimes with a lot of the chops guys. I don't hear the blues influence so much and I don't hear the soulful influence so much. I just hear sort of chops in the service of kind of corny music. That world doesn't interest me too much."

When it came to recording the album, did you use your customary Suhr and 100-watt Marshall rig this time around?

'Yeah, I love Suhr guitars. There's a Scott Henderson model and that's the closest thing they make to just a good old vintage Strat. But it's just easier to play because the neck is a 16-inch radius, so the fingerboard is a bit flatter, big frets so it's easy to play like a Gibson, but it has the total sound of a vintage Strat. And the cool thing about it is, they have a little dummy pickup in there in the horn. It's noiseless, so there's no hum. Stevie Ray Vaughan used to do that, but he used to put a real pickup [in there] and when you put a real pickup in your guitar, that's like 5,000 to 6,000ohms, so it's going to change the tone. So Stevie had to turn the treble quite a bit up on his amp to make up for what that dummy pickup under his pickguard was doing. But with the Suhr thing, it's a special type of design where instead of 5,000 or 6,000ohms it's only 200ohms. So you don't even hear it making any difference in the sound at all. It just takes away the hum."

How about your pedalboard?

"It's pretty small because I have to travel with it – it has to fit in a suitcase and I have to carry it with me, so I can't have one of those giant pedalboards with lots of stuff. But I do use a Boss SE-70, which has a lot of really cool sounds in it. I use that into a different amp. I have a wet/dry setup: the Marshall 412 cabinet is dry, and then I carry around a Fender Hot Rod Deluxe that's just a small 112 combo and that's where the reverb and delays and all my other effects from the SE-70 are. With the combination of the pedals that I use and the sounds that are in the SE-70, which is a pretty cool unit for as old as it is, I can get some pretty cool sounds and textures. Not nearly as much as I can do in the studio, but as much as I can for having to carry around such a small [amount of] gear with me."

Scott tours with bassist Romain Labaye and drummer Archibald Ligonnière as the Scott Henderson Trio

The album has some beautifully intricate playing, but it's the feel, phrasing and melodicism that really sets it apart. Do you think that the spectacle of flashy playing has dominated guitar too much in recent years?

"Well, I think it's kind of sad that saxophone players or trumpet players can get up there and play like Miles and people appreciate it. But if a guitar player does that, some people think, 'Oh, that guy has no chops, and he's not worth listening to.' It just seems like there's a whole audience out there that the only thing they want from a guitar is to hear a lot of chops. I mean, people love Wayne Shorter's playing or Miles Davis's playing and *they* didn't play like guitar players; they played more like singers. Jeff Beck was immensely popular and well deservedly so because he could take a melody and just do amazing things with it. But the way he played was ridiculously melodic and creative.

"That's kind of the school that I would like to belong to because that's how I think when I play. I'm not thinking about trying to impress anybody with my chops because I don't have any! [laughs] I'm trying to put the right note in the right place with the best tone I can get. And that's basically all I know how to do. It's what I've tried to get good at. And that's where my priority lies." **[JD]**

> "[That whammy bar-like sound] comes from listening to slide players, horn players and vocalists where every note has a little bit of grease on it"

Karnevel! by Scott Henderson is available now on Mango Prom Music

www.scotthenderson.net

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

Twist Or Stick?

Neville Marten ponders whether it's best to switch between lots of guitars, or nurture one main instrument that you get to know intimately...

Over the years I've tended to adjust to any guitar I pick up. I take it as read that this is what the builder intended to make and so I work around any foibles. It could come from my days at Gibson/Norlin where we'd often QC 100 guitars a day, then the same with CBS/Fender – plus, of course, the thousands I've played over decades of working on guitar magazines.

"There are players who are never satisfied with what the guitar companies present. Within days they're changing pickups, swapping bridges..."

But there are players who are never satisfied with what the guitar companies present. Within days they're changing pickups, swapping bridges, refretting with bigger wire, and so on. Some players I know have a problem with intonation, too. It's never in tune enough. So they've sought out the Buzz Feiten system, had the guitar Plek'd, fitted roller nuts and locking tuners, or changed bridge saddles.

Now, I have never done those things, except for the time when we all fitted DiMarzio Super Distortion and PAF pickups to our humbucking guitars, then Seymour Duncan JBs. And put Hot Rails in Strats, and so on. Since then, apart from changing pickups for a specific reason, as I did recently on my sunburst Strat, I like things as they are. Of course, I do buy good guitars so perhaps that shouldn't surprise me.

When I worked for SynthAxe, some guitarists adapted immediately to the techniques required to play this new instrument, while others recoiled in horror. I won't name names, but I took an 'Axe to several famous guitarists and I reckon it was around 70:30 against. But those that got it, *really* got it. We were at Summer NAMM in Chicago in 1986 and our stand was causing the usual stir – due in no small part to having Allan Holdsworth demoing on it.

One day, two session guitarists came to try it: hardened studio guys, middle-aged, proper musos who could sight-read the proverbial flypaper. Both were very eager to have a go. I passed the instrument to the first guy, gave him my usual five-minute tutorial, set up a sound he liked, and within a minute he'd handed it back. He just couldn't make the necessary physical and mental leap. The next chap loved it. He was comping jazz, doing two-handed tapping, playing Jimmy Smith-style 'organ' on the keys, and generally having a ball. The difference between those equally able musicians' ability to adapt was startling.

Singles Night

Getting back to guitars, then, one musician I know has spent his entire career using just one electric. A very fine player, he's worked with many famous artists and the only guitar I ever saw him use was a vintage Fender Esquire. One pickup! But he'd learned to coax all manner of sounds from it, and to my knowledge was never asked to play something else. He knew that guitar inside out and, using just a pedal or two and a basic amp, could produce whatever was required.

My gut feeling is we are best to know one or two guitars intimately, rather than swapping all the time as I have done throughout my career. I'm sure my playing has suffered as a result, although in truth I really can't say. Many famous guitarists have stuck with one or two instruments – Brian May and Alvin Lee, both brilliant players, spring instantly to mind. But BB King seemed to have a different 'Lucille' in every photo and he wasn't half bad. Ritchie Blackmore mostly played one white Strat, Clapton rotated between a few Gibsons before finding 'Blackie', and when I saw the Eagles, Joe Walsh switched guitar almost every other song. And what about Steve Hackett, Brent Mason and Ry Cooder? They slap all manner of pickups and contraptions on their favourite guitars to make them perfect for them.

The more I continue with this, the more I wonder if I'm barking up a tree that doesn't need barking up. But I'm sure there's something in it. What do you think? Who's a twister, and who's a sticker?

GAS OF THE MONTH

Alright Esquire?

What? Squier Limited Edition Paranormal Esquire Deluxe
Where seen? www.fender.com **Price?** £379

Description? This guitar touches on several points in this month's column. And what a beauty it is. A Limited Edition, it features a Blue Sparkle finish, slim gloss-finished neck, Deluxe-style large scratchplate, through-body hardtail bridge, and a single Fender Wide Range pickup. Instead of a toggle switch Fender has opted for a three-way chickenhead rotary offering single coil, humbucker, or humbucker bypassing both volume and tone controls. What a cool guitar. And that price?

Team Building

This month **Alex Bishop** clears the decks to prepare the workshop for a three-week guitar-making extravaganza

Twice a year, I run guitar-making courses designed to satisfy the demands of students who wish to experience building an acoustic guitar from start to finish in just three weeks. Given that my processes are predominantly hand-tool led – carving with chisels and smoothing with planes in favour of shaping with routers and power sanders – it's an intensive lutherie experience that aims to leave my students with a six-string as good as any high-end guitar they might buy from the shops, all the while revelling in the magic and mystery of a master luthier's workshop. No pressure there, then...

It's easy enough for the students to turn up on day one. But it's become necessary for me to spend a week preparing the workshop in order to be ready for this guitar-making spectacle. This is where I find myself at the start of this month, carefully organising piles of tonewood to be prepped for three different guitars: an OM, a dreadnought, and a Gypsy jazz guitar.

Prep School

The work this week included jointing and thicknessing backs: two sets of rosewood and one English walnut in this instance. Rosewood is a relatively dense wood, so the walnut was up first to save blunting the newly sharpened plane blade (with thanks to Devin, my work experience student this week, who was loyally stationed at my sharpening wheel for a day). It was necessary to ensure that the two panels of wood that make up each back were perfectly aligned such that no light passed through when held up together at a window. This is an uncompromising test but one that would ensure the integrity of the back join for decades to come.

Plenty of work remained for the students, however, who would have to hand-plane their spruce tops to the desired thickness. The soundboard is the beating heart of the sound of any acoustic guitar, and its thickness has everything to do with producing a resonant sound. Too thick and the top will be overly stiff resulting in muted overtones; too thin and the tone becomes weak and overly bright. It's not good enough to follow precise measurements because no two pieces of wood are the same. My own expertise will have to come into play to help encourage the cautious students to go further, as well as rein in the overly eager ones.

The dreadnought model that one of my students has chosen to build this month is also a first for me, so a good chunk of the work this week has been spent putting together a new mould based on some technical drawings I'd been working on. This time around I decided to employ the CAD services of my buddy Ash (Nightingale Guitars) to speed up production of this crucial bit of kit. In essence, the mould forms a scaffolding around a guitar within which the luthier can coax the wood into shape, and it will be an essential tool on day one of the course: bending the sides.

I must admit I always feel some trepidation before welcoming three strangers into my workshop and setting them loose on my tools and tonewood supplies. It's easy to take for granted the intuition that develops from years of lutherie experience, but I know that steaming exotic hardwoods around a hot iron to form guitar-shaped curves is not an everyday experience for most people. Visions of wood splintering, tools flying and strings breaking begin to pass through my mind.

"My own expertise will have to come into play to help encourage the cautious students to go further, as well as rein in the overly eager ones"

However, I'm looking forward to helping these would-be luthiers wield a chisel for the first time and to grow the confidence necessary to create the best work. After days of shaping braces and carving up necks, it will be quite the accomplishment for them each to finally hear the voices of three new guitars. What more can we do than embrace the process? After all, you can't craft a guitar without making a whole lot of sawdust. G

The next course will run 17 June to 4 July 2024
www.guitarmakingschool.co.uk

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

A collective of guitar-making students get to work on their from-scratch acoustic builds in Alex's Bristol workshop

Carry That Weight

Neville Marten asks, do lighter guitars sound better? And are older guitars better because they're often lighter? Is it all in the pickups? Help!

Let me preface things by saying that this is neither a scientific paper nor a definitive answer. It's simply a slice of wholegrain common sense, a meaty layer of builder knowledge, with a dollop of full-fat player experience. To this end, I've conscripted music industry friends with bags of the aforementioned to help guide me through the shark-infested waters of opinion.

There does seem to be something of an obsession with lighter guitars, though. Ever noticed how many guitar store websites have photos of high-end instruments on scales, so you can see how heavy they are? In my experience lighter guitars do sound different from heavier ones. Consider an 8lb Les Paul versus an 11lb monster. The lighter one is likely to be more responsive: tickle the strings and it mews like a kitten; whack it hard and it roars like a tiger. The hefty one will be more of a bruiser, with less dynamic response but more midrange grunt. And many players believe that's what a Les Paul *should* sound like.

"Exactly!" exclaims Julian White, World Guitars' owner and longtime vintage collector. "I often hear people say that a heavy guitar has better sustain. Usually, it's older guys who fondly remember their 70s and 80s Les Paul Customs that weighed 10lb or more." So it would seem a heavy Les Paul is simply a different *kind* of Les Paul than a lighter one.

The ultra-knowledgeable Tim Mills of Bare Knuckle Pickups elaborates: "As a general rule, the heavier a guitar the darker the tone, as higher frequencies lack the energy to resonate through the denser body. Low frequencies have a longer cycle and travel through more easily. Ever been outside a gig and all you hear is the low-end of the PA, drums and bass, then step inside and your head is taken off by the high-end of the guitars and cymbals? It's similar to how vibrations resonate through guitar bodies, off the strings, via the bridge and through the pickups to the amplifier."

Whether lighter guitars actually sound better is a tougher nut to crack. Celebrated luthier Patrick James Eggle says: "In my experience, lighter guitars do sound better and are more reactive. We build a variety of models and have target weights for each, for this very reason. Our Macon carved-tops are set-neck, normally with maple and mahogany bodies, and our target weight is around 8lb. We use honeycomb body chambering as it reduces weight without scooping the tone."

World Guitars' Julian feels the same: "Having owned a fair few solidbody electrics and played many, many more, I've noticed a direct correlation between weight and tone. Talking Custom Shop Les Paul Standards, the reissues tend to weigh between 8lb and 9lb, the majority over 8.5. The LPs in the low eights have the noticeably more 'airy' and 'woody' tone that I associate with older guitars. High eights and above are more focused and 'pushy', often appearing louder."

So that's the set-neck side of things, how about bolt-ons? "The lighter Fenders of around 7lb do have a more airy tone," Julian reckons, "but a bigger factor for me is whether they are ash or alder bodied. Ash definitely gives more snap and a generally brighter tone."

Patrick prefers his bolt-ons on the lighter side, too. "Our T-style Oz guitars are almost all built with very light swamp ash bodies and roasted maple necks. Most weigh between 6.5lb and 7lb. But there's a sweet spot for each family of guitar, which is where our target weights come in."

The two-piece swamp ash body of Patrick James Eggle's Oz Cream T helps keep its weight around 3kg (6.6lb), and when it comes to pickups, Patrick says they "tend to fit lower output pickups in lighter guitars"

Beyond Weight

But what about the effect of pickups on tone? "The type of pickup will play a massive role in the sound of a guitar, regardless of body weight," opines Tim. "Single coils have a higher resonant peak and wider frequency response, humbuckers have a narrower, midrange-focused response and lower resonant peak. Partnering a lower output pickup with a higher resonant peak can help make the most of the available treble response of a heavy guitar, while pickups with lower resonant peaks can be a good solution for controlling the high-end response of a lighter-bodied guitar. This is where having a thorough understanding of your guitar can help immensely when it comes to choosing pickups."

Patrick, too, thinks you can govern the outcome to some degree. "We tend to fit lower output pickups in lighter guitars. High-output pickups in light guitars can be a lot of fun but harder to control."

This Gibson Les Paul 70s Deluxe from 2021 stays true to the model's hefty origins, clocking in at 4.4kg – almost 10lb – with no weight relief in the body

To replicate the ageing process many acoustic guitar manufacturers employ torrefaction, essentially slow roasting their guitars' tops and bracing. Electric builders are doing it now, too, as Patrick mentioned with his Oz range. Julian again: "Yes, it's said to simulate years of drying out or 'seasoning'. While sceptical at first, some of the really good-sounding S-type guitars I've played recently have used torrefied woods. The most noticeable was a Custom Shop Strat that sounded wonderful. I later found out it had both a roasted neck *and* body."

Whether vintage guitars sound better than new ones is a controversial issue. My question is, does the '57 Strat or '59 Les Paul that you try today sound identical to when its original owner plugged it in decades ago? I'll hazard not, and let Julian give his view on why. "Vintage guitars certainly do sound different, and I prefer the tone. It could be down to the pickups becoming weaker with age, better quality steel in the hardware, thinning nitro lacquer and so on, but the biggest factor [to consider] I think is the wood. Older wood has the warmer, more 'woody' sound that I associate with vintage guitars, due to those decades of natural seasoning. Some people will totally disagree with all this, as one person's ultimate dream tone may not be right for another."

> "Generally, the heavier a guitar the darker the tone, as higher frequencies lack the energy to resonate through the denser body" ***Tim Mills***

Tim agrees: "Any guitar, light or heavy, can create a good tone so long as you want to pick it up, connect with it and enjoy playing it." But does Patrick's final point seal the deal on weight? "We don't build many of what I would call 'heavy' guitars," he confesses, "as literally nobody asks for it."

So, what do you think? Do you prefer light, heavy or somewhere in between? We'd love to hear from you. G

THREE TO GET READY

Experience the light brigade

Parker Fly USA models £2,000 to £3,000

Ken Parker and Larry Fishman's Fly was a futuristic, twin-cutaway shape with a carbon fibre exo-skeleton surrounding a highly sculpted wooden body weighing just 2kg (4.4lbs), with a splittable DiMarzio 'bucker and Fishman piezo pickup. Built between 1993 and 2016, its commercial failure masks a brilliant design that was ahead of its time. The later DragonFly DF524 (above) adds some more conventional elements to the mix.

PHOTO: HTTPS://UK.DONNERMUSIC.COM

Donner HUSH-1 Headless £297

With its detachable body frame, piezo bridge pickup and preamp, Donner has thought through the headless HUSH-1 from the ground up. A single hex wrench operates truss rod adjustment, tuning and frame attachment/removal. Six fine-tuners line up diagonally behind the bridge, while volume, phase reverse, plus High and Low controls let you tailor your tone. A headphones socket provides silent practice, and the HUSH-1 is amp, PA and studio friendly, too. And it's only £297!

Danelectro DC59M £599

When Sears-Roebuck approached Nathan Daniel to create a budget guitar range, he used a poplar frame to create his Danelectro guitars' outline, which also carried plywood sections onto which were mounted 'lipstick tube' pickups, bridge and tailpiece. Front and back were Masonite (hardboard) fascias, with the seam at the edge hidden by glued-on fabric. The three-a-side neck with rosewood 'board lent an air of normality, but the guitars did look like fairly regular single-cut (U2) and double-cut (Shorthorn) models.

Open Chords

Richard Barrett presents alternative voicings of commonly found chords using open strings

There's nothing wrong with a good honest E, C# minor or B, but sometimes it's nice to give things a twist – and that's what we're doing with this issue's theme of alternative voicings using open strings. Players such as Joni Mitchell, Steve Hackett and Steve Howe have all demonstrated this with considerable aplomb.

In these examples, I've used the open first and second strings to keep a jangle at the top-end, while looking to stray from the norm – and perhaps even emulate the effect of using an alternativee/open tuning. In a band mix, it can also be desirable to keep a certain uniformity to the sound, so arranging chords like this can make it easier for the mixer to feature your guitar more prominently.

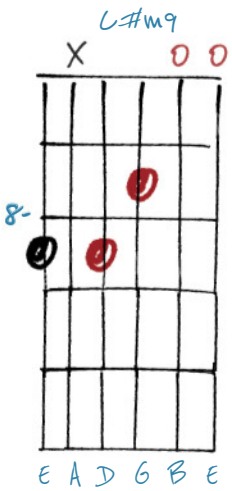
The five examples below will work equally well on acoustic or electric guitar (without too much distortion) and will hopefully lead you to make some other happy discoveries along the way. G

PHOTO BY ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/DISNEY GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT VIA GETTY IMAGES

Joni Mitchell's open-tuned chords offer depth of sound with a twist

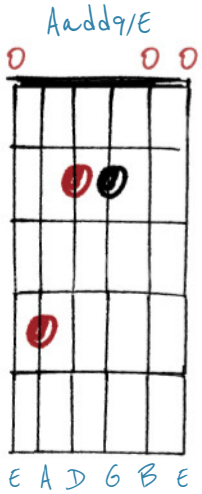
Example 1

This C#m9 omits the fifth string – this is done by allowing the (usually second) finger fretting the root on the sixth string to lay across and stop it ringing. We get a 7th (B) from the fourth string at the 9th fret, plus the open second string. The 9th is added at the 8th fret of the third string. Finally, the minor 3rd (E) is added courtesy of the open first string. Some duplication of notes is going on, but it's still an interesting sound.



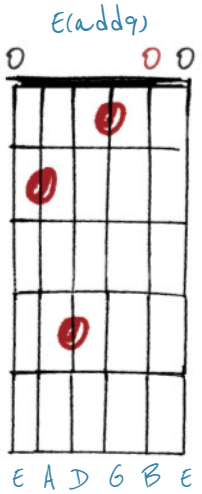
Example 2

This example looks and sounds very much like an Asus/E, but there is more going on in the low-end. The presence of the C# on the fifth string means we should call it an Aadd9/E. This is particularly reminiscent of Joni Mitchell's open-tuned chords and makes a great 'set up' as a IV chord returning to E major. In fact, that's exactly where we'll be going shortly, but there will be a twist to that one, too!



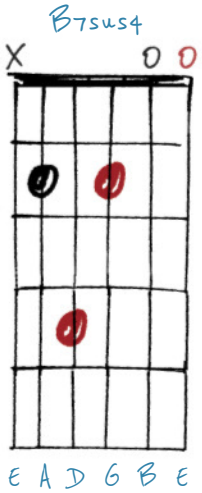
Example 3

This is an alternative take on the E major chord but a sort of 'deluxe' version. Your ears, skill and judgement will tell you whether it's appropriate or not to replace this with a regular E major. Note that removing the first finger from the G# on the third string and leaving this open gives us an open G natural. This is the ♭3rd, making a lovely Em(add9). Be sure to experiment with the other examples in a similar way where possible.



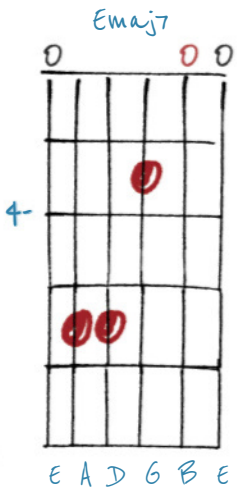
Example 4

If this sounds like B7sus4 to you, you're correct! The 4th (E) is heard on the open first string, with the root (B) appearing on the open second string and the 2nd fret of the fifth string. Looking more closely, you'll see this is similar to the more conventional barre chord version of B7 that appears in this position but with the advantage of the ringing open high strings – and less effort for the fretting hand.



Example 5

This is an unusual 'stacking' of notes, with a little dissonance in the low-end, but the most technically correct name for it is Emaj7. The major 7th itself (D#) is happening down on the fifth string, adjacent to the root (E) on the open sixth. That's the reason for the dissonance, but it's easy to omit the sixth string. Moving onto the fourth string we find the major 3rd (G#), then the open second and first strings (B and E) give us the 5th and root respectively.



Have Your Say!

Help us celebrate our big birthday by sharing your views on the world of guitar

We're gearing up to celebrate *Guitarist* magazine's 40th anniversary and we'd like to hear all about your playing and buying habits, what your favourite parts of the mag are, and how you see the guitar industry as a whole today. This will help us better understand what kind of guitar content you enjoy most so we can give you more of what you love in future. Your insights also help us understand how our world of guitar is changing – and what matters to players not only today but in coming years.

To take part in our survey, simply head to the link below. We'd like to extend a big thank you for sharing your views and tastes in all things guitar here.

Rock on – Jamie Dickson, *Guitarist* Editor-in-Chief

www.surveymonkey.com/r/guitarist-is-40

Survey closes on 15 March 2024

Feedback

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.
Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

STAR LETTER

TAKE IT TO THE BRIDGE...

I've been playing guitar since the mid-1970s but still consider myself an amateur. A few years ago, a good friend set up my trusty Squier Strat with some new hardware and, although it played well enough, a big chunk of its personality was gone. This puzzled me greatly and sent me on a voyage of discovery. About the same time, a book came out about Brian May's guitar, examining it closely. I was suddenly hooked on how guitars were constructed, reading about the quirks and failings of different models.

I bought more books and watched StewMac videos. I'm an engineer by trade so I had to get 'hands on'. I built a prototype, made wiring circuits, and at one point I had a Strat with 19 different pickup permutations. Your article in issue 506, 'Lightning Strike' [from The Mod Squad], reminded me of my nice wine red Westfield LP-type (none of my guitars are anything special). I got it in my head that the slack fit of the tailpiece may have an effect on the sound due to lost string vibration energy and the strings essentially being tethered to parts that could move, albeit by microns; what I call 'micro-vibration'.

Wishing to prove that the string resonance could be improved, I asked a guy in the machine shop where I was working to tap a tailpiece for a couple of grub screws, which would grab the securing posts hard and prevent movement. Bingo, the thing resonated like a grand piano. You could actually feel it on your body while unplugged. The flat mid-sounding ordinary plank now had strong lows and much clearer highs when amplified. This was easily confirmed by slackening the grub screws. My theory was correct!

I know Epiphone tried something similar using spring loaded ends that were designed to grip the securing posts, but I have never seen that in my local shops. The other advantage if you're one of these guys who changes all the strings at once is the tailpiece doesn't fall off.

Thanks for continuously feeding my curiosity; maybe I can find more time to practise now on my Fender Mustang Micro I got for Christmas!

Graham Tait

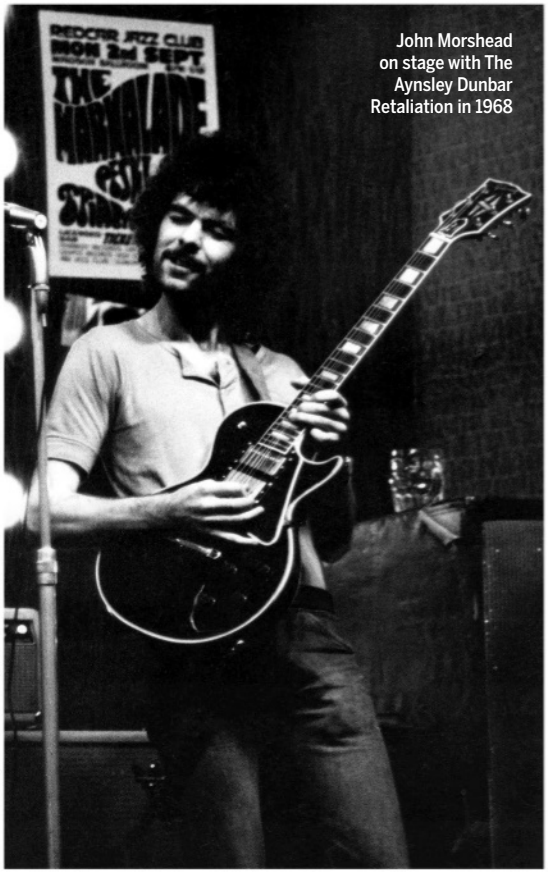
Thanks for sending in the results of your adventures in tone engineering, Graham. Interestingly, it comes on the heels of last issue's Raising The Tone feature about acoustic neck joints, which explored the importance of a large, firmly secured contact area between resonating parts of the guitar. Though your experiments concern electric guitar tone, there's a parallel with the world of acoustic neck joints. These days, that secure contact between key components is typically achieved using high-precision metal fittings and bolts, though the old-fashioned glued dovetail joint still works well when well executed.

And there should be no surprise in any of the above, as every guitar's sound originates from string vibration – and anything that dissipates the energy of those strings to no good purpose, such as unnecessary vibration at the junction of key parts, can sap the vibrancy of your tone. To congratulate you on your experiments in this area, you win this month's Star Letter prize.

MEMORIES OF MORSHEAD

I first saw John Morshead one evening in January 1968, when I went to The Marquee Club in Wardour Street, in London's Soho, to see US bluesman Eddie Boyd, backed by Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac. Incidentally, that evening also marked the debut of Jethro Tull, who were advertised as the support band called Navy Blue, but apparently changed their name while sitting in the dressing room prior to playing! Having arrived, we learned that the Mac would not be playing, and that Boyd would instead be backed by The Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation. Dunbar had previously played drums with Liverpool band The Mojos, and then a six-month stint with John Mayall in 1967, prior to a brief period with the Jeff Beck Band, but had left to form his own band (citing the fact that Beck played so loud you couldn't hear anything else!).

I was aware of the Retaliation, and had a copy of their impressive debut 45rpm single from late 1967, and was subsequently more than pleasantly surprised by how good they were live. Quite apart from the



John Morshead on stage with The Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation in 1968

PHOTO BY GRAHAM LOWE /REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

With interruption to global supply chains during the pandemic, sourcing hardware in the UK looked increasingly attractive

excellent rhythm section of Dunbar and bassist Alex Dmochowski, and the fine vocal and keyboards from Victor Brox, guitarist John Morshead really caught my attention. Here was someone who had a great sound, which was not 'in yer face', and a subtlety of touch that was in the same area as BB King and Peter Green. Playing a black three-pickup Gibson Les Paul Custom, and with the bluesman's 'uniform' of long curly hair, sideboards, rugby shirt, Levi's and python skin boots, he not only played the part but also looked it!

Morshead had a bit of the devil in him – Victor, as well as singing, playing guitar, piano and organ, also blew a cornucopia, which is somewhat like a cornet. During gigs it usually rested on the Leslie speaker cabinet, ready for him to pick up at any odd moment and insert into a song. Apparently, the other band members got a bit cheesed off with him playing it so often, with the result that, at one gig, John surreptitiously picked up the offending instrument and placed it directly behind Victor, who always stood up while playing. When he stepped back – crunch – and no more cornucopia!

There is no doubt in my mind that John Morshead was a class act, and although decades have passed since he made his contributions to the 60s blues boom, his name deserves to appear alongside those others that have remained in the spotlight over all these years.

John Holmes

Thanks, John, for these lovely anecdotes about an under-praised player. For context, John has written to this magazine many times in praise of Mr Morshead and as we have, to our shame, failed to yet produce a definitive feature on him, we wanted to share some of John's memories of Morshead (reproduced in edited form here) as possibly the first in a series on unsung or under-celebrated guitar heroes. Any other readers got any nice memories of John Morshead or other players who have been perhaps overlooked in recent years who may deserve a little retrospective praise here? Send them in and we'll print the best.

NECK & NECK

Here's one for the Mod Squad. How about a round-up/review of parts available from UK sources? I'm particularly interested in replacement necks. I'm lucky enough to have a guitar made by Jerry Bix (sadly, no longer making). It's brilliant! At the time, Jerry and I had a conversation about making replacement necks for Strats and Teles. Net result, for many years I have had the replacement Jerry made as a trial on my partscaster, but I've recently been looking for another replacement. Warmoth was an initial thought until I saw the cost of import. So I trawled around for a UK-made neck and found various sources, including Guitar Anatomy, UK Guitar Necks, etc, but it's not clear where any of these are actually made. There's a massive price difference (when compared with Warmoth), but I've no idea whether the quality is up to it and I can't find any reviews of these products. How about it?

Jon Blake

Nice idea, Jon, we'll certainly pass it on to Dave Burrluck for future Mod Squad columns. As a side note, it's worth mentioning that the pandemic, with its interruption to global supply chains, made sourcing hardware and other components in the UK look increasingly attractive to many British makers. For example, PJD was not so long ago looking at trying to source all of its metal hardware from the UK and currently winds its own pickups in-house. We also have the example of makers such as Gordon Smith who craft their own pickups and more for their guitars. But when it comes to parts that home luthiers can buy and use, we'll do some digging and hopefully Dave can shed more light in a future Mod Squad.

Reader Jon Blake hit a hurdle in his search for a UK-made Warmoth equivalent neck. Can The Mod Squad help?

VOX AMPLIFICATION LTD

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Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

WIN A VINTAGE PROSHOP CUSTOM-BUILD GUITAR!

Here's your chance to spec your very own bespoke build with the Vintage ProShop team

To get your guitar-making mojo going, take a look at these examples made by the Vintage ProShop team. Your dream spec awaits!

Ever fancied a custom-made guitar... until you've looked into the cost? We hear you, and so does the UK-brand Vintage who recently announced its own custom-build programme that costs a lot less than you might think.

You can choose one of its many standard models as a basis and the ProShop team will pimp it up to your precise specification, upgrading hardware, pickups and a choice of custom colours in pristine gloss, muted satin or aged relic style. To get an idea of what the ProShop can do, head over to vintageguitarsrus.com/collections/proshop where you can check out the 'Inspiration Gallery' to get your creative juices flowing and investigate the 'Create Your Own' options that are available.

The best bit is that the company is offering one *Guitarist* reader a Vintage ProShop voucher with a retail value of £1,000, which will cover a pretty extensive makeover. All you have to do to be in with a chance of winning is head to the link opposite and follow the online instructions.

Vintage celebrated a significant anniversary in 2020. Was it the company's...
a) 10th
b) 15th
c) 25th

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Make sure you enter at *https://bit.ly/git509proshop* before the closing date
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TRIPTYCH

THE POWER OF THREE

Pushing the boundaries of vintage Strat tones into uncharted territories of super heavy fuzz-drenched riffing

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JOHN DIGGINS

27 July 1945 – 2 January 2024

Master luthier John Diggins of Jaydee Custom Guitars dedicated over five decades to the craft of guitar building

Words Paul Balmer

Though not all readers will recognise his name, it's likely most of us have *heard* John Diggins' craftsmanship – from *Paranoid* and *Iron Man* by Tony Iommi and Black Sabbath, to Slade booming out 'Super Yob' Christmas anthems on *Top Of The Pops*, along with any wonderfully dynamic slap bass from Mark King of Level 42. Fired up in the 50s by the genius of Leo Fender and Les Paul, John – who would later become known as 'Jaydee' – made subtle improvements to classic guitar designs for many top musicians to play.

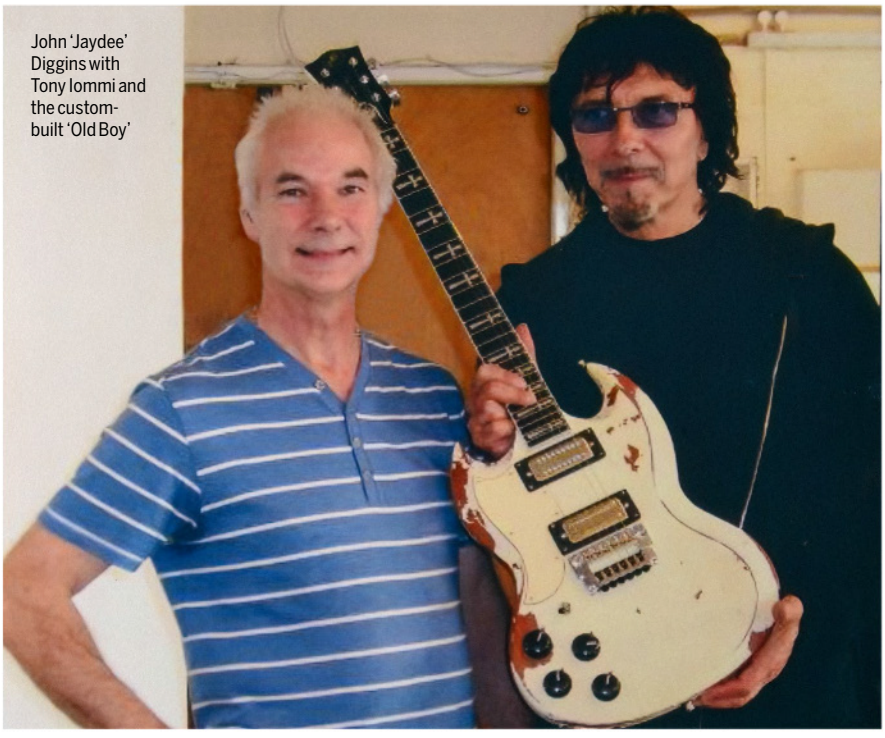
John's roots serving musicians' custom needs began in the post-war skiffle craze. Deprived of American guitars, as all UK musicians were at the time, he set about making his cheap European guitar playable in his woodworking classroom at school. He then had a military career and travelled the world as a musician in the army.

I first met John while he was carrying out his apprenticeship at John Birch's Birmingham workshop in 1974; he was then the woodworking genius behind some superb one-off instruments. John Birch had made the first 24-fret SG after Iommi's requests to various big guitar companies were declined, and John Diggins swiftly built the famous 'Old Boy' for the musician on his kitchen table following an invite to join Black Sabbath as guitar tech on their 1975 US tour; the lacquer was still soft when it hit the road. This model would go on to become Iommi's main guitar and, eventually, John would also develop the blade pickup, which didn't fade as the strings were bent away from conventional polepieces.

By 1977, John had founded Jaydee Custom Guitars. He always had an inquiring mind and was constantly seeking better solutions, which manifested as astonishing woodwork and finishes, or innovative electronics, all of which brought in a practical approach calling on his own experience as a gigging musician. From the balance of an instrument when worn, to the need for extreme screening in a world increasingly filled with stray radio frequencies and mobile phones, he always found answers to please his ever-demanding clientele.

Among John's clients was Mark King of Level 42, with whom he would help revolutionise the sound of bass guitar and make everybody think again about the use of natural wooden-cased pickups – all custom-wound and 'Supernatural' with active electronics.

> *"John was constantly seeking better solutions, which manifested as astonishing woodwork and innovative electronics"*
>
> PAUL BALMER



John 'Jaydee' Diggins with Tony Iommi and the custom-built 'Old Boy'

PHOTO COURTESY OF H. DIGGINS

Roy Orbison also visited John to have several custom guitars made, including a three-quarter size S-style for his son Wesley and a half-size T-style for his son Roy Jr. Having performed several services, repairs and pickup rewinds on Angus Young's SG, John Diggins was commissioned to build a custom guitar, while Brian May's Red Special also came to him for modifications and improvements in the early days of Queen; John would even make the first Red Special replica. In 2020, John and I began to document his long career and this culminated in a book called *Jaydee*, which comes out later this year (see www.musiconearth.co.uk).

John sadly passed away in Birmingham on 2 January following complications from a long-term illness. The Jaydee enterprise continues in the safe hands of his wife, Helen, sons Michael and Andrew, and grandson Toby to uphold John's passion for great fretted instruments and a great British guitar-making marque. G

TONY CLARKIN

24 November 1946 – 7 January 2024

The Magnum guitarist died following diagnosis with a rare spinal condition, leaving behind a staggering body of work and huge affection amongst fans and industry peers

Words Henry Yates

An insatiable songwriter, evocative guitarist and far warmer interviewee than his inscrutable dark glasses would suggest, it was Tony Clarkin's role as the driving force behind Magnum that sustained the band he co-founded in 1972 for a half-century, even through the periods when their brand of prog-tinged melodic rock fell from favour. In the end, the release of 23rd album *Here Comes The Rain* in January – just five days after his death aged 77, following diagnosis with a rare spinal condition – was the one band commitment that Clarkin missed over a lifetime's service.

Born in the Shard End area of Birmingham on 24 November 1946, Clarkin recalled that "listening to Buddy Guy started me off", while he credited Deep Purple for showing him the "escape mechanism" from the menial labour on offer to a young man in the late 60s. Partnering Magnum's career-long singer Bob Catley for a residency at the city's Rum Runner club, Clarkin told *Rock Pages TV* that "we were just a jukebox for people to dance to, really. I'd started writing and I said, 'What about if we do some of my songs?' We got sacked about three months after that."

It was Tony Clarkin's role as the driving force behind Magnum that sustained the band he co-founded in 1972 for a half-century

Tony Clarkin was the songwriting force behind his band Magnum's success

PHOTO BY MICK HUTSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Now trading in Clarkin's originals, Magnum were snapped up by Jet Records, and when the band made it into a recording studio, they aimed high, with *In The Beginning* – the opening track from 1978's debut album, *Kingdom Of Madness* – roaming to almost eight minutes. Perhaps Clarkin's expansive storytelling style came from his writing method. "Sometimes I read a book," he explained, "and usually this gives me a place to start."

The Jet Record deal turned out not to be Magnum's golden ticket, and as Clarkin told *Let It Rock*, 1985's *On A Storyteller's Night* felt like a final roll of the dice ("When we recorded that album, we were totally broke, so we had nothing to lose"). Instead, led out by galloping single *Just Like An Arrow*, it heralded Magnum's purple patch, with *Vigilante* (1986), *Wings Of Heaven* (1988) and *Goodnight LA* (1990) all significant chart hits in a pre-grunge landscape.

Throughout, it was Clarkin alone who fed the band, writing the entirety of Magnum's catalogue and admitting in 2002 that he thought of little else. "Since we embarked on *Kingdom Of Madness*, not a single month had gone by in which I didn't work for Magnum, composed for the group or at least thought of them permanently. For almost 20 years, all my thoughts had revolved around the band."

Magnum split in the mid-90s and Clarkin resurfaced in Hard Rain. But it was his best-known band's return with *Breath Of Life* in 2002 that reignited his work rate and found his amiable personality undimmed. That late success continued until last December, when Magnum cancelled a spring tour, with Clarkin's statement citing spinal issues exacerbated by the weight of his guitars. "It's not life-limiting, but it can be degenerative, and sadly it's not curable."

Clarkin signed off in defiant style ("This is not gonna be the end of Magnum"), but *Here Comes The Rain* would prove the swansong of one of British rock's great career songwriters. He will be greatly missed. G

TOMMY EMMANUEL & MOLLY TUTTLE

It's not often that you find two of the world's greatest acoustic players on tour together in the UK, and we couldn't resist the opportunity to invite both of them to the *Guitarist* studios for an interview and video masterclass...

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis

Watching Tommy Emmanuel play his music live on stage is memorable in itself, but when it's combined with bluegrass singer-songwriter Molly Tuttle as the support act, it becomes an experience not to be missed. Tommy's presence on the scene has been one of the wonders of the acoustic world for many years. And while Molly is a relatively new name on the circuit, she is beginning to garner the international fame she richly deserves. In 2023, she won a Grammy with her band, Golden Highway, for the Best Bluegrass Album with *Crooked Tree*, and this was followed by the gong in the same category at this year's ceremony for *City Of Gold*.

Both Tommy and Molly are fiery performers in their own right, so when their talents are combined – as witnessed on their recent UK tour – the result is a formidable tour de force of acoustic virtuosity. When the pair were set to appear in our home town of Bath, at a venue right next door to the *Guitarist* offices, we sent an invitation to meet for a catch-up and a truly remarkable video masterclass.

Watch Tommy and Molly in action in our exclusive video masterclass here! **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

C.G.P.

TOMMY EMMANUEL

When we spoke to Tommy about his upcoming work we couldn't help but notice his timetable is as packed as ever. However, keeping himself busy is precisely what fuels his creative fires, whether in the studio or out on the road.

Your professional life seems as hectic as it ever was. How are you coping with the work schedule these days?

"Well, this year there's three periods where I have a little time off between tours because I have a new live album coming out that I recorded at the Sydney Opera House. I did two shows, recorded them both and filmed them, and so I have that to finish mixing and mastering. I have a bunch of new songs and I want to get my next solo album done this year, ready to come out next year. So there's a lot of stuff in the works.

"The way my life is right now, it would wear most people out. But this is what I've always done, you know? I was looking at some of the schedules from 2001, and holy smoke! I was doing, like, 46 dates in a row and stuff like that. So I'm used to hard work, it's what I love. And when I get going, that's when my creativity seems to show up. I mean, playing a show nearly every night is good for me – it makes me dig deeper and I get a momentum going. Even just coming here today, and talking with you and shooting videos and playing, is so good for me because I get to talk about creative things and things that I love."

You've said in the past that when you go into the studio you take a selection of guitars with you. How do you go about choosing which guitar is the best fit for any particular song?

"I just find the guitar that's right for the song. I have a Larrivée C-10, which is a 12-fretter, and I use that in some songs where I'm looking for a certain texture or warmth. But then there are other songs where the little Maton 808, with the smaller body, works beautifully. Sometimes, I use the bigger-bodied Maton as well.

"I have a few voices; I have a Martin-sounding guitar, a 000-28 [style]. I don't own a D-28, a dreadnought Martin, but I do have a couple of dreadnought-size guitars that were handmade and given to me ages ago; I just hung on to them, but I haven't used them for recording. But most of the guitars I've collected over the years, I've given away, you know? I auction them off for my charities: Doctors Without Borders, Guitars 4 Vets and the Salvation Army."

Do you enjoy recording?

"When I'm going to record in the studio I'm in heaven because, first of all, I'm playing acoustically on great microphones and

we've spent time finding exactly the right choice of mics, the right placement, all that. And then I have headphones and I can hear everything so clearly. I very rarely do more than one or two takes of a song in the studio because I don't like dropping in and fixing up and doing all that. I like playing the song and feeling the momentum of the song. So if I have to keep dropping in and fixing things, then I haven't practised enough!

"I recorded the whole of *Tommysongs*, which is a double-album of 24 original songs, in two days: 24 songs, you know? I had just finished a tour and I planned it that way. I went straight into the studio the day after the last show and I was ready to fire. You've got to be prepared, you can't waste time in the studio.

"I don't have a studio at home. I don't want one. Basically, I'm a writer who uses my iPhone as my writing tool. I just go on to Voice Memos and when I'm writing a song, I record it, then I listen back and see what it needs. When I get the song done, I'll record what I call the 'definitive demo' of the song

"Playing a show nearly every night is good for me – it makes me dig deeper and I get a momentum going"

– this is how it goes – and then I move on to the next song. Then, when I'm ready to record, I want the best microphones, the best engineer and the best sound that I can possibly get. So I'd rather spend the money on a great, great studio and a great engineer, than spend a fortune decking out some studio and then trying to engineer it myself. I'm not an engineer, I'm a player. And I need to capture that."

How long does it take you to practise a new song before you feel it's ready to perform?
"For some songs, like *Fuel*, I wrote that on a train trip from Paris to Cologne, and I played it that night on the show because I felt it was all done. Other times I think a song is done and then I'll play it again at another time and my instincts will say, 'No, it's not done yet. This needs something else.'

"There's a song that's coming on the new album called *Scarlett's World*. That took me two weeks to finish because I wrote all this stuff and I put it in there and jammed it in. Then when I went back and listened to it, I went, 'I'm trying to do too much...' and my instincts were like, 'Get rid of that and get rid of that...' and so I narrowed it down to the meat and potatoes of the song. Tell the story and leave it: stop."

You've changed your live setup since we last spoke and you're now using the Udo Roesner Da Capo amp. Tell us more...
"Yeah, the Da Capo 75. Basically, it's to replace the [AER] Compact 60 that I used for so many years. The Compact 60 is still a great amp and it always will be, but when Udo brought that amp to me, we A/B'd them. I did the soundcheck using the Compact 60 and then plugged in Udo's and the sound just opened up. If you have a look at some of my TikTok videos from last year, I have the Udo amp under a table and it's barely on. I can hear the amp, but when you watch the video, you think it's just a mic. That's how good the amp is. You think it's just a mic, right?"

Do you still try to keep your live setup straightforward and simple?
"Absolutely, yeah. I have one pedal on stage and it's a tuner that mutes, right? That's it. So my signal is from the guitar into the tuner, tuner into the AER Pocket Tool preamp, which is basically just the AER technology and sound – so that's a big, fat clean signal. Then I come out of that and go into the Udo amp and I come out of the amp into the PA. So it's two direct signals, one direct from the Pocket Tool to the PA, then direct from the amp to the PA.

"[Front-of-house engineer] Steve [Law] puts them at a certain level so it all gels together. So from the direct signal, you're getting all the rich bottom-end from the bass of the guitar, and the high-end and all that. Then, from the amp, you're getting that woolly, kind of gritty midrange. You add the two together and they become one sound.

"I do the same kind of thing with microphones when I'm recording. I get the mics that sound really sweet and woody, and then I have a Royer ribbon mic sitting about a foot behind the mics in front of me and it just adds grit to the whole picture – a certain grit that you can't get with a normal microphone, you know?"

Travelling around, you're at the mercy of different PAs of varying quality in the venues you play. How do you manage to maintain a good sound every night?
"How I cope with it is I have the best sound guy there is! He knows what I'm looking for; he knows what I need. When you're playing through your own amp and your own preamp and you know your sound, you're going to get a sound that inspires you.

"The only things I struggle with are, firstly, my own hearing because I wear hearing aids, right? My hearing was destroyed before I was born: I was born with yellow fever. So I've been wearing hearing aids for a long time. So there's that, and then there's modern technology.

Tommy went on to win a Grammy in the 2024 awards held in Los Angeles in February

PAs are all flown now and they're line array and so people on stage wouldn't even know the PA was on. I'm used to feeling the size of my notes. So we use side fill for me, where we have a small PA equivalent 10ft from me on both sides [of the stage] pointing in my direction. It's got bigness to the sound, but it's not affecting the sound that Steve's getting out the front."

Is playing live still as exciting for you as it always was?
"Well, I hope I'm getting better at it! It's a love-hate relationship because I love playing so much, but when I struggle with sound or something, then I think, 'Oh God, I can play so much better when I'm just in a room and I can hear myself...' But that's the stuff that sharpens your sword; when the going gets tough, that's when I dig in, that's when I really try harder. And you've got to do that. The older I get, the more I depend on that part of me: 'Okay, this is getting like a struggle, time to relax...' and so I try to undo all my urgency because I know I can play better or whatever. I try to do something to defuse those emotions, so I can just constantly play and enjoy it.

"When you're sitting out in the [audience], you have no idea what the player is going through. And a person like me, I'm on stage, I'm looking at you, I'm looking at my guitar and I'm listening to every detail. I'm listening to my timing, my tuning, the sound that I'm making, the feel that I'm playing with. I'm listening to everything on a really hyper level. But, at the same time, I want to be enjoying myself. That's what it's all about."

Tommy Emmanuel's latest album, *Accomplice Two*, is available now on Slimstyle Records
www.tommyemmanuel.com

MOLLY TUTTLE

After the dust had settled at the *Guitarist* studios and both Tommy and Molly had motored off to their next tour date, we heard about the duo's success at the Grammys in LA on 4 February where Molly picked up her second award in the Best Bluegrass Album category for *City Of Gold*. Remarkably, she was up against both Willie Nelson and Billy Strings and described winning for a second year running as "surreal..." If you look at the video of her winning this year's award you'll see her sprinting to the stage to pick it up. If you wondered what the rush was all about, read on...

Winning the 2023 Grammy Award for *Crooked Tree* wasn't exactly without incident, was it?

"It was amazing. I was up for Bluegrass Album and Best New Artist, and the Best New Artist thing was really unexpected. It was outside of the American Roots genre, which I definitely didn't see happening, and it was a wonderful surprise. We got there and got through the red carpet and sat down in the auditorium and they announced that *Crooked Tree* won and it was surreal.

"I was towards the back of the place and I was running to the stage, but they didn't see me. And when someone's not there for the award, they just move right along to the next one. So they started announcing the next award and it was this moment like, 'Oh, my God, I just won a Grammy!' and, 'Oh no, I don't get to do my speech and thank all the people who helped to make the album...'

"It was pretty funny, looking back on it, but in the moment I was trying to balance feelings like: 'Well, that is the coolest thing that's ever happened' and 'Wait, what just happened? and 'How did I not make it to the stage in time?' After that, I went through the press interviews and got to hold one of the Grammys they keep backstage but don't have anyone's name on them, but you have pictures taken with them. Just soaking in the whole show was amazing."

Have you experienced any after-effects on your career, having won a Grammy?

"Yeah, totally. I mean, I've been performing and making records for a long time, but when I made *Crooked Tree*, it felt like I was going back to my roots. Coming out of the pandemic, I was feeling nostalgic for the music I grew up with, so I made a bluegrass album, put together a brand-new band, and it felt like the start of this new exciting path that I was on.

"Winning the Grammy solidified us as a band; it really boosted our profile, in a way. So many cool opportunities came from it. I think our first show of the year was playing on *Jimmy Kimmel [Live!]*. That was

very cool, to get to do some TV stuff and publicity around winning that award. Since then, it's just felt like so many things have happened over the last year that have been really exciting, like bucket-list moments for the band. And we made an album together and put it out last year. We're just on this really fun ride right now."

Where does a new song start for you – is it usually a melodic idea or does it come from a lyric?

"It usually starts with some sort of idea for what I want to write about. Maybe a lyric idea or sometimes I just talk to someone who I'm writing with for a while about what we're wanting to say with the song. Then someone might start strumming a guitar, humming a melody. Sometimes you come up with a couple of words that lead you in a direction. But these days I like to have an idea of some topics I want to write about – what I want to say with my song – because that keeps it all focused and can even inform how the music sounds."

Do you find that playing live and playing in the studio involves two completely different headspaces?

"Oh, yeah, totally. I think I really realised that on this last record, *City Of Gold*. It was the first time I had gone into the studio with my live touring band and I think we're so used to playing together with an audience and feeding off the energy of the crowd. If you don't play everything perfectly, it's okay. It's like this energy that you're putting out there into the audience and they're giving it back to you.

"Playing with Tommy, he talks about showmanship a lot: 'I just do it for the show.'

"So many exciting things happened over the last year, like bucket-list moments. We're on this really fun ride right now"

And, obviously, he's such a virtuosic player but he's also an amazing performer and extremely entertaining to watch. So you kind of get into that headspace.

"When you go into the studio, it's just the sound of what you're playing and singing and the songs you've written. So you have to think about it in a different way: 'How do I get the best tone?' 'Am I perfectly in tune?' 'Am I playing everything as well executed as I can?' And you can also really obsess over stuff because you have the chance to go back and fix things as many times as you want, as long as you don't run out of studio time. It can be hard to know, 'When do I stop? When is it good?' I'm definitely someone who just wants to go back and fine-tune everything as much as possible.

"Working [and co-producing] with Jerry Douglas on the last two records, he's someone who's more of the mind that you 'get it in the moment', and usually what you played when you were feeding off each other's energy had the best vibe. You shouldn't go back and try to redo everything and make it perfect, because [that way] it loses some of the soul."

You've brought a special custom-made Pre-War guitar out on tour with you this time. Tell us more...

"I have two Pre-War guitars now. One is rosewood [back and sides], one's mahogany – and I have my rosewood one with me here. It's a Brazilian rosewood dreadnought-style guitar and the wood was actually gifted to me from someone who came to my show years ago. They gave the wood to the Pre-War guitar company and they made me the guitar. It was cool, I got to be in on the whole process of creating the guitar, making the neck the size I wanted.

"The company bases its guitar designs on guitars from the 30s and a lot of them have these really thick necks. So the first Pre-War guitar I got had this really fat round neck and, for the one that I have here, I told them I wanted it a little thinner. I got to design the sunburst; I like sunburst guitars, which you don't see too often in bluegrass, but I think they're pretty.

"I got to visit while they were making the guitar and they said, 'Do you want to write a little message on the inside of the guitar?' and I ended up writing a quote from the song *Standing On The Moon* [by The Grateful Dead] that I cover a lot and I wrote: 'A lovely view of heaven... but I'd rather be with you', which is one of my favourite lyrics from that song. You can't actually see it, it's on the inside of the top so I don't know if I'll ever actually see the little message I wrote."

What's your live setup?

"I'm always tweaking things a little bit. I have a new pickup; I just last month got a Fishman Aura pickup and preamp that is brand-new. Before, I was using two different pickups from K&K [Sound] – a Double Helix and a Pure Mini – but there was some sort of issue with the interface, the way the two pickups were working together. I loved how they sounded, but there was some sort of humming thing that would happen sometimes and we didn't know how to fix it. So I got a new pickup and I'm down to just one input now, which is good. Before, I was on a stereo system,

Molly has two Pre-War acoustics: this one features Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides, the wood for which was gifted to her by a fan

which sometimes made it hard using other people's gear – you know, sitting in with people. It was just a little bit more complicated. So now I have the Fishman, which has been good so far. I'm still getting used to it and working out the kinks and dialling it in. Sometimes I have effects pedals that I use – delay or tremolo – but I'm not a huge gear head. I usually keep it fairly simple."

Do you go straight into the PA from the guitar then?

"I go through my Aura preamp. I sent my guitar to [Fishman] and they sampled my guitar through different mics and so it has all these settings where I can go from mic to mic and it's supposed to make it sound more natural."

What lies in the immediate future for you?

"It's busy. We're starting to announce some dates for this year and I'm probably gonna go back into the studio at some point. Touring with my band, starting in April, is when we really are going to pick up. We have a couple of shows here and there for the first couple months of the year, but then we're taking a little bit of a break as a band before hitting it hard again, starting in April.

"We did 99 shows last year and I'll probably do close to that amount this year. I know I'll be recording another album, obviously. I'm not sure when exactly. I'm kind of getting back into the writing process, but I would like to release some new music this year. So I think, whether it's an album or a collection of songs, I'm gonna go back and record some new songs."

Molly Tuttle's latest album, *City Of Gold*, is available now on Nonesuch Records
www.mollytuttlemusic.com

Savage, socially charged and allergic to cliché, Bristol's Idles are less categorisable than ever on fifth album, *Tangk*. We meet square-peg guitar duo Mark Bowen and Lee Kiernan to talk baritones, dog-bothering frequencies and why modelling is "wack"

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates **Photography** Phil Barker

Rising from the Bristol post-punk scene with 2017's *Brutalism*, Idles momentarily seemed like route-one firebrands, taking on toxic masculinity, a crumbling NHS and the gamed class system over chippy beats and jawbreaker riffs. But if nobody expected the broadened horizons of 2021's *Crawler* – a fourth album that saw frontman Joe Talbot stop rabble-rousing to actually sing, while the band pinballed between glam, soul and brooding electronica – then this year's *Tangk* is an even bolder leap, putting acres of distance between Idles and their noisenik roots.

That the band now sound capable of anything is largely down to the partnership between Mark Bowen and Lee Kiernan: two guitarists who reject anything that's even on nodding terms with cliché. Their manifesto, as set out in today's interview in the band's rehearsal space, is as bold as it is refreshing. No traditional guitar parts. No familiar sounds. No solos. Sometimes not even a tuner. "We're trying to avoid sounding like a conventional guitar band," says Bowen. "We're always like, 'Well, where can a guitar go that isn't expected?'"

What did you hope to achieve with *Tangk*, relative to past albums?

Mark Bowen: "We laid some groundwork on *Crawler*, in that we were taking a more experimental approach. So the goal on *Tangk* was to push that further. I felt like I had reached the limitations of what a guitar band is. Our goal has always been to expand what guitars can do, rather than disregard them completely. Because I think it's important that we do play guitar, especially on stage, and we wanted to create an environment where we can still work with those violent, dark tones, but they've got a new background. Within that, I wanted to push the harmonic content. There's more complexity to the chords and sounds. More chordal evolution, even throughout a song. Joe started to sing on the last album and we were hyped about it. But one of the shortfalls of the type of music we've created before is that if you start singing melodically, for us, it turns cringey. So this album was about creating a supportive melodic environment for Joe to sing on. Because the music always comes first."

"We're trying to avoid sounding like a conventional guitar band. We're always like, 'Where can a guitar go that isn't expected?'" MARK BOWEN

You use textures and layers really well in Idles. What role do effects play in your sound and what do you regard as the limitations and the freedoms?
Lee Kiernan: "I don't think there are any limitations, really. This album has grown even further than the ones before because of exactly what Bowen was just talking about, which is the inspiration of harmonics and chordal changes. Or even voicings – that was a massive deal. The work Bowen put in on piano, to take us away from the chords we'd been playing for years – he'd be there, trying new fingerings until a chord we'd play all the time was now so much more interesting. And the moment that happened was when we were able to explore effects. Even if it's the kind of effect we've used a million times, it's now got a whole new life in it."
Mark: "The other thing is the synchronicity between us. So there's tension, when we're complete opposites, guitar-wise. Or synergy, where we're like one instrument and Lee plays something that adds the spike or point of interest to a chord that I'm playing. On this album, that's been pushed as far as we've ever gone. Lee could have come in and noodled on top [of my parts]. But the supportive role of his guitar on this album is the key thing that gels it all together and also reminds you what you're listening to. It's not some producer's project, y'know? It's not really about soundscaping, or sounds that are non-reproduceable unless you've got 40 fucking people on stage. It's more like, 'Oh shit, this is being created by a band.'"

There are some striking low-register sounds...
Mark: "This entire album, I play baritone. As a band, we're obsessed with bass. Like, from the post-punk background, it's the main instrument. Early doors, both me and Lee wanted to heighten the bass by being the antithesis of it. We were making spiky, jarring, abrasive sounds. The treble was all the way up on the amps. But as we progressed, I'm now the opposite. There's so much low-end information coming from my guitars, and that's always what I'm seeking out. And then Lee is the spike and sparkle on top. But yeah, *Tangk* was almost entirely baritone, and it's played on bass amps, or very high-wattage guitar amps that can cope with the headroom. And big 15-inch speakers, y'know? So it's really about trying to cultivate that low-end."

"This entire album, I play baritone. We're obsessed with bass... I'm always seeking out low-end information" MARK BOWEN

1. Many of the band's brooding, dark guitar sounds stem from Mark Bowen's devotion to using baritone and low-end tones effectively

With Mark going lower, Lee, did you change your rig or settings to enhance that?
Lee: "No, I stayed relatively the same. But weirdly, I ended up using two new amps that hold bottom-end even better, which meant my frequency range was so much more impactful, but with a guitar. So I was using a Hiwatt and a 1970s Peavey Deuce. They're both big valve boys that can take both high and low, so it meant I could float between where I needed to be. I actually ended up going another octave down, even in my feedback, because it had to sit in a frequency bandwidth that occupied synths, baritone and then low subs as well."

Most conventional guitar bands know exactly where the instruments will sit. Has it been a challenge learning to navigate different frequencies?
Mark: "I think it comes instinctively to us. Like, we don't reference a lot of rock and guitar music when we're writing and recording. And it's not about 'parts' or what the instrument is doing; it's more about creating space and working out what is the most important thing, then preserving the minimalist beauty of that. Also, if you're listening to something and the guitars are in a weird frequency bandwidth then suddenly you have an absolute fucking banger of a Dick Dale guitar part or something that comes in and blows your head off, it's like, you've been waiting for that. We're not just pummelling people in the face all the time. We've learnt that delayed gratification is better. So we keep the [prominent guitar parts] back and then when it comes in, you're like, 'Holy shit!' Our favourite for that is the middle eight of *Gift Horse*. You're like, 'Oh, there it is!'"
Lee: "I remember, Bowen and I were sat in the studio, about two weeks into the sessions, going, 'We haven't played a single solo on this record. Well, maybe that's just how this album goes...'"
Mark: "It's not about 'chops' or solos. It's more like, there's these big guitar bits, like Lee's guitar on *Gift Horse*, or the feedback bit on *Hall & Oates*, or the weird fucking Aphex Twin stuff on *Grace*. But even just the open-tuning chords that are ringing out on *Grace*. It's just like, 'Oh, that was big – sick!'"

"I love real amps. I love the way a note feels. If you take that away from the speakers, it just starts feeling sterile to me" LEE KIERNAN

There's a memorable tremolo effect that accelerates and decelerates on *Roy*...

Mark: "That belongs to [producer] Nigel Godrich – it's prohibitively expensive these days, but fuck me, it works. This album, for me, was really about being circumspect with the effects. A lot of the time, it's really down to amp choice. So sometimes it's a guitar going through an MS-20, or sometimes it's just an amp at the highest possible volume it will go but playing reservedly on the actual instrument itself. I think this was the first time I used volume knobs. A lot of times in the studio, we didn't use tuners. What we'd do is tune to the track and the chord shape, because 440Hz across your chord can sound cheesy. But if you just subtly flatten or sharpen elements of that, it becomes more organic, natural and purposeful."

2. In rehearsals for upcoming live dates, Lee Kiernan paired his Hiwatt Custom 88 head with a 1970s Peavey Deuce, as both amps offered him abundant headroom and both high and low-end clarity and definition

3. Lee Kiernan's extensive effects rig is brought under the central control of a GigRig G3 switching unit. A key effect for *Tangk* was the Twin Peaks harmonic tremolo by Drolo

4. Lee's guitars have unused controls removed for bulletproof reliability

Lee, you mentioned using physical amps. What is it that keeps you loyal to that traditional format, as opposed to modelling?

Lee: "I love real amps. I love the way a note feels. If you take that away from the speakers, it just starts feeling sterile to me. Like, I completely understand the usage of profiling, I think it's incredible. But I have to think of them as two separate things. For me, modelling is something you can use as a fail-safe for touring. But when it comes to sound, recording, writing – it has to be amps."

Mark: "I hate modelling, I think it's wack. You can hear it right away. One of the big things on *Tangk* is that we recorded a lot of it to tape. Obviously, it goes into digital at points, so there's going to be some form of dither or issues around the distortion and what occurs above the frequency range. But with an amp, and with tape, that is blunted because of the mechanics of it. And the distortion and what happens above the frequency range, that is taken care of. If you're not aware of that with modelling and using DAWs, you can get into scenarios where you've created something great, but it fucks with your head and sounds horrible. You're looking at the waveform on your EQ and it's like, 'There's nothing horrible here.' But it's all the information that's happening above that is really fucking with your head... and probably your dog!"

How did you approach capturing the guitar sound in the studio on *Tangk*?

Mark: "The unsung hero on this album is Mikko Gordon, the engineer. Just the mic'ing on the amps, the use of preamps, how he used that desk and his thought process. It was never, like, when you go back into the control room and you hear your guitar part and it's been absorbed by everything else. Mikko would sit and watch us dial stuff in, then he'd move the mic a millimetre and you'd just be like, 'Holy shit.' You'd go back to the control room and be like, 'It sounds exactly like it did stood in front of my amp.' There's so much spill on this album, it's wild. I don't think other people's guitars sound like this. We sound like Idles, and that's great."

Finally, what guitars were you using on the new album?

Mark: "For me, it was almost exclusively a Fender Stratocaster baritone custom. When we recorded *Ultra Mono* [2020] at the La Frette studio in France, Olivier [Bloch Lainé], the owner, brought me a Fender Bajo Sexto to play and that changed my world. I just started playing baritone all the time. I got Fender to make me one that fitted my Strat proclivities. And it's stock pickups because they sound fucking great. So that's my baritone when I want the twanginess of a guitar but playing those lower notes.

"I hate modelling, I think it's wack. You can hear it right away. On *Tangk* we recorded a lot of it to tape" MARK BOWEN

"Then I've also got an EGC [Electrical Guitar Company] baritone that's all-aluminium bodied, and that's incredibly resonant with hotly wound pickups. It's nigh-on uncontrollable on stage, fucking impossible to play! And the resonance that comes from the aluminium neck, especially with the big strings, and when you're playing in a band that also has a bass guitar giving you lots of resonant frequency – it sings, and sometimes to your advantage.

"Then I also used a Fender Player Mustang I got years ago, with a pickup from Creamery Pickups. I played a lot of bass, too. Nigel's got this beautiful 70s Mustang with flat-wound strings – and a hollow-bodied Höfner that's broken and was mostly used for feedback because it couldn't be used for anything else reliably."

How about your setup, Lee?

Lee: "I only used four guitars. There was the pink Mustang I've toured with for years – again, it has a Creamery pickup. That was used for *Hall & Oates*, absolutely smashing it out. Most of the feedback is done with that Mustang because it just goes insane when you put it near an amp. I used my Jackson a few times because of the whammy; I'm obsessed with 80s hair metal. The majority of the record was done on my 70th Anniversary Esquire. Again, it's stock, but it's perfect. That's it. Very simple. We usually take 20 guitars each to the studio and always use the same ones."

Mark: "I think it adds to the studio experience, having loads of guitars. I treat mine like shit, so they're strewn all over the floor. It's like having to clamber over a rock!"

Lee: "There's that thing where you go, 'What if we try *this* one?' 'Nah.' 'What if we try *this* one?' 'Nah.' Then we just go back to the one we use every time...!" G

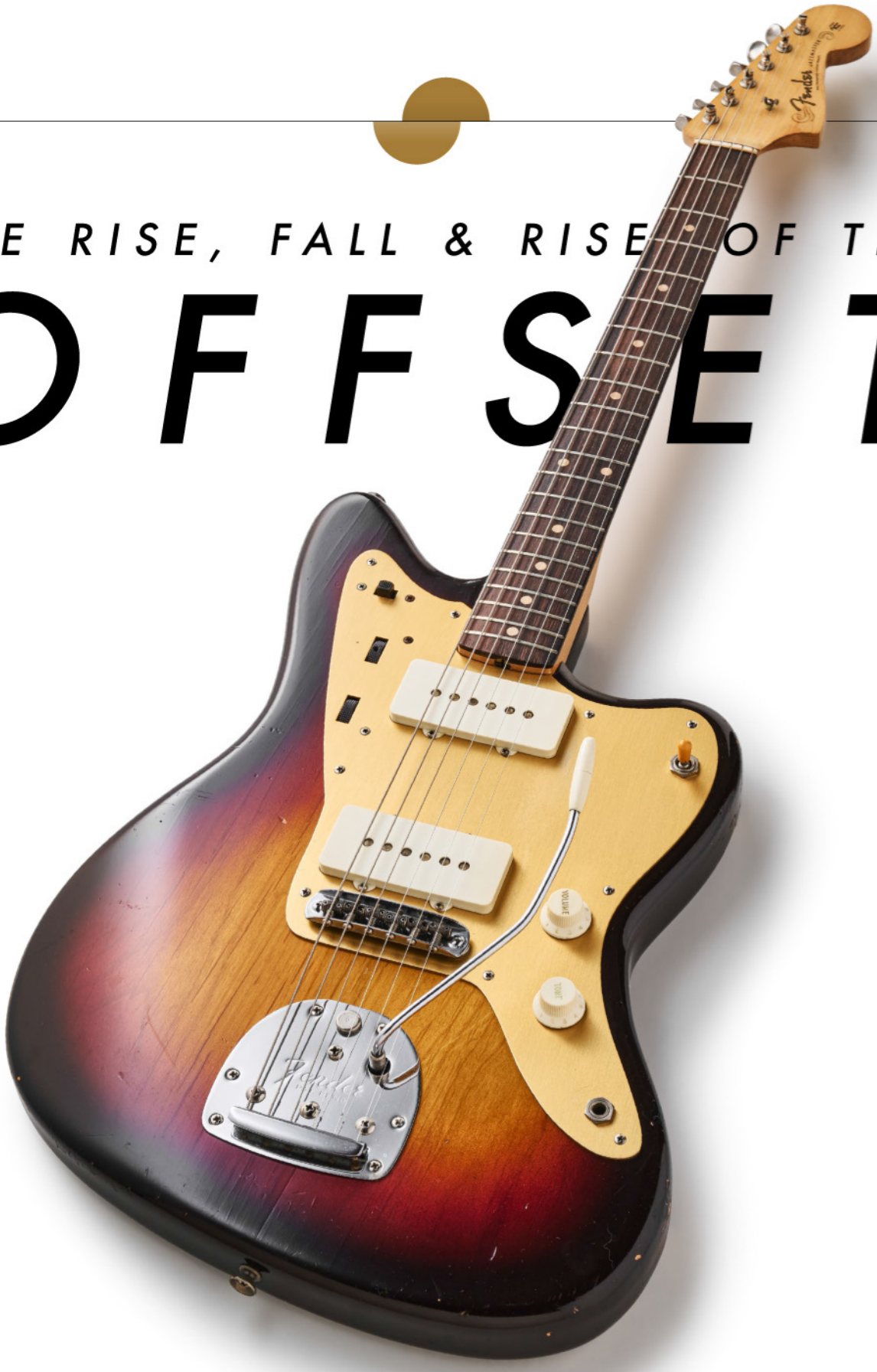
5. Lee taking delivery of a new custom-built single-pickup electric that arrived during the photoshoot from West Valley Guitars' Josh Stopford

Idles new album, *Tangk*, is available now on Partisan Records

www.idlesband.com

"The goal on *Tangk* was to push [the more experimental approach of *Crawler*] further. More chordal evolution, even throughout a song" MARK BOWEN

THE RISE, FALL & RISE OF THE OFFSET



Fender's Jazzmaster, which made its debut in 1958, and its shorter-scale sibling the Jaguar, launched four years later, failed to surpass the popularity and utility of the Strat and Tele that went before them. Only now, over 60 years on, is the offset-body electric truly becoming recognised as a guitar for all players. We trace the offset's long journey from misunderstood outsider to contemporary king

Words Huw Price & Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis & Phil Barker

Nobody disputes the fact that the Jazzmaster was designed for jazz guitarists, so it's hard to understand why Leo Fender imagined all those 'one tone for everything' archtop huggers would be drawn to complex control layouts and a floating vibrato mounted on a plank. And if anything, the Jaguar is an even more baffling proposition. Like so many of Leo Fender's products, these instruments ended up being wildly successful at producing sounds that ran contrary to his intentions and that would not have met his approval.

That's why, first of all, we're going to take a deep dive into the radical design features, ingenious hardware and innovative electronics that make Fender's finest offsets more popular than ever and continue to inspire guitar players and builders alike.

Offset Bodies

The Jazzmaster and Jaguar body shape represents a significant departure from conventional guitar design. Guitar bodies had traditionally been symmetrical – cutaways notwithstanding – but the offset waist was introduced for ergonomic reasons and the term 'offset' is now generally applied to most asymmetrical guitars.

Observing how jazz players performed, Leo Fender and Freddie Tavares set out to design a guitar that would feel more comfortable in a seated position. As Leo explained to author Tom Wheeler in *American Guitars: An Illustrated History*: "Normally, the player is forced to hold the guitar at an angle to play it because it's not balanced. So it was a matter of fitting it to the ribcage. The offset waist [...] went right along with the idea of the dressed away portion in the back. It was just a matter of function."

> "The offset waist went right along with the idea of a dressed away portion in the back. It was a matter of function..." LEO FENDER

The body was larger and generally heavier than Tele and

Guitarist would like to express sincere thanks to Martin and Paul Kelly, authors of *Fender: The Golden Age 1946-1970*, Phil Hylander of the Seven Decades collection, and Gas Station Guitars in Taunton for access to the fabulous vintage and collectible offset instruments in this month's issue

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

1. This Jazzmaster prototype was shot at the Songbirds Museum in Chattanooga a few years ago. No longer on display there today, it showed what might have been for the model, including maple fingerboard and black plastic parts, before Fender opted for the now-familiar format that was released not long afterwards in 1958

1958 FENDER JAZZMASTER TOBACCO SUNBURST

Paul Kelly, who co-authored *Fender: The Golden Age 1946-1970* with his brother Martin Kelly, recalls an all-too-familiar motivation for buying his first 50s Jazzmaster. In the late 70s, Paul and Martin had set their hearts on buying an original pre-CBS Fender. "There was a shop called Holiday Music in Leytonstone and they started importing everything," Paul recalls. "We couldn't afford Strats or Teles, but you could get a 50s Fender Jazzmaster for really cheap. I eventually got one there for £180. And that was a lot of money, but it was affordable, you know? They had a sunburst and a gold one, and the gold one was £250, whereas mine was £180. Anyway, I managed to buy a sunburst one that was [refinished] white – it was a '59, but the paint had been scraped off it. As I was walking out of the shop, the guy said, 'Oh, don't you want the case?' And so he went and got out this brown Tolex case. So that was the first one I actually bought."

This particular all-original '58 example with its gold, anodised scratchplate is from the Seven Decades collection.

Strat types and was slightly thinned down by mid-1959. Most were constructed from two or three pieces of alder, but rare blonde-finished examples were ash. Most Jazzmasters are played standing up, which somewhat undermines the design concept and makes the neck feel like it's protruding further from the body. The Jaguar body, meanwhile, was pretty much identical, besides a slightly pointier top horn. When surf groups started playing them, the Mosrite company took notice and introduced offset models of its own that were good enough to lure The Ventures away from Fender.

Gibson's reverse Firebird came out in 1963 with a body and headstock that looked like an upside-down offset. Some say Fender took exception, prompting Gibson to introduce the non-reverse Firebird in 1965. In truth, it was probably done to relaunch an under-performing model and reduce production costs. But if Gibson was really responding to Fender, why is the non-reverse design even more Fender-like? You might conclude Gibson was 'flipping the 'bird'.

Necks

The desire to move upmarket resulted in the Jazzmaster being the first Fender with a rosewood fretboard and top-loaded truss rod. An early advert shows a Jazzmaster with Telecaster knobs, black pickup covers and a rosewood-capped neck with a walnut plug at the headstock, but it was probably a prototype. The headstock shape is subtly different from the Strat's, with a tad more curve on the bottom. The Jaguar neck's 24-inch scale length was shorter than the Jazzmaster's 25 ½-inch scale, and it had 22 frets, rather than 21. This gives Jaguars a slightly looser and slinkier feel, for the equivalent string gauge, and arguably a warmer acoustic response.

When surf groups started playing them, the Mosrite company took notice and introduced offset models of its own

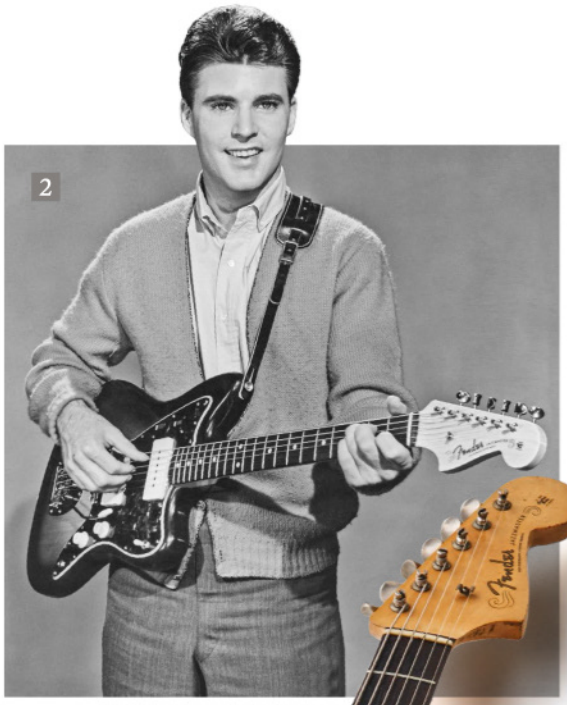


PHOTO BY ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

2. Between 1958, when the Jazzmaster was launched, and 1959 actor and singer Ricky Nelson (above) had more hits than Elvis. The Jazzmaster did not, however, supersede Strats and Teles in most bands of the era

1958 FENDER JAZZMASTER SPARKLE SURFBURST

The worlds of cars and guitars were closely intertwined in 1950s America. The custom car culture of California in the era ensured that eye-catching paint jobs were much in demand among hot-rod drivers who wanted to stand out from the pack visually as well as through sheer horsepower. This movement coincided with dazzling new paints by companies such as Alcoa, and thus sparkle finishes became the most striking of a new breed of paint treatments for customising cars.

Fender wasn't slow to offer customers similar finishes on its guitars as special orders, either as a refinish for a Fender they already owned or as a custom order. As Fender's factory didn't have the facility for spraying the coarse particulates in sparkle paints, orders were subbed out to local auto-finish specialists (such as Dennis Swiden). This stunning 1958 Jazzmaster is one such guitar and its unique livery has been dubbed 'Sparkle Surfburst'. It was formerly in the collection of vintage guitar expert Norm Harris and it may have been played by Nick O'Malley of the Del-Tones.

Up to mid-1962 all Jazzmasters and the very earliest Jaguars had slab-rosewood fingerboards. Fender changed to veneer 'boards from July 1962 onwards and began binding them in 1965. The Jaguar's headstock was always slightly bigger and more curved – a portent of the 'big headstocks' that would follow.

Hardware

Had Leo Fender been left to his own devices, the Stratocaster would have been equipped with a vibrato very similar to the design featured on the offsets. He'd understood that low friction was key to stable tuning and designed a bridge with roller saddles. After Bill Carson's road tests revealed a vibration issue with the bearings and poor sustain, Freddie Tavares talked Leo into a complete redesign. It must have stung because $5,000 had already been invested in tooling, but Leo eventually revisited his favoured option.

The bridge was redesigned with threaded steel saddles and long posts at each end of a bridge plate that slotted into metal 'thimbles' that were set into the body. It was intended to rock back and forth, and string-height adjustments could be made by altering the post lengths and/or individual saddles. The Jaguar bridge also had a string-muting device attached.

The strings were anchored in a curved plate that passed through (but made no contact with) a baseplate that was screwed to the body. This string plate was placed over a strong spring at one end and pivoted against a knife edge at the other. The spring pressed up against the string plate to resist string-pull and the unit was fully floating.

With a Strat vibrato, the springs stretch when the bar is depressed and then pull the bridge back into its default position. And with the offset vibrato, depressing the bar compresses the spring and equilibrium is restored when it expands. This allowed Fender to implement a locking feature that would slide across to deactivate the vibrato and restore tuning in the event of string breakage. Some modern players have found this feature invaluable when drop tuning, but careful adjustments are needed for it to work.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

3. The Jaguar, launched in 1962, experienced much the same initial fate as the Jazzmaster. While it garnered its share of surf music fans, such as Carl Wilson of The Beach Boys, pictured above in 1964, it was a niche Fender model through the 1960s

1960 FENDER JAZZMASTER (CUSTOM ORDER) GOLD

This stunning 1960 Jazzmaster is typical of early custom colour Jazzmasters in that the gold paint used does not belong to one of the later, more familiar classifications from the Fender Custom Color charts, such as Shoreline Gold. Instead, it is likely an unspecified metallic gold by a commercial paint firm, possibly sourced from automobile part suppliers in Fullerton.

This model goes all in on the gold theme with anodised gold scratchplate and hardware to boot. Unlike some later Fender offsets, however, it does not sport a matching headstock. "The matching headstock thing was applied to offsets, but it was not applied to the other [Fender electrics]," Martin Kelly adds, which explains the later prevalence of matching headstocks on reissue Fender Japan offsets. Custom colour Fenders are traditionally among the most expensive to collect, but Phil Hylander of Seven Decades says the relative affordability of vintage offsets, for many years, made custom colour examples more accessible to buyers.

The offset vibrato was designed for heavier gauge strings, but the lighter strings that were becoming commonplace revealed some issues with insufficient break angle, strings popping off saddles and extraneous noises behind the bridge. (For more, check out our offset tips feature on page 74.)

Circuitry

The Jazzmaster's two fully independent circuits were inspired by a home-built lap steel that Forrest White showed Leo Fender in the early 1950s. This allowed players to switch instantaneously from a darker and quieter 'rhythm' tone to a louder and brighter 'lead' setting. In rhythm mode, only the neck pickup is active, and the volume and tone settings are controlled by two knurled thumbwheels. They barely protrude above the pickguard and do not obstruct the player.

The Jazzmaster's two fully independent circuits were inspired by a home-built lap steel that Forrest White showed Leo Fender

A 50kohm tone potentiometer darkens the rhythm circuit because it's much like a regular tone control that only operates between 3 and 0. The lead circuit is more conventional, with a three-way selector and master volume and tone controls. Rather than Fender's usual 250k value, 1 megohm potentiometers are used with a 0.033µF tone capacitor.

Jaguar wiring was very similar, but the rhythm circuit had a 0.01µF tone capacitor and Fender employed three slider switches on a metal plate, rather than a three-way switch. Two flicked the pickups on and off, while the third routed both pickup outputs through a 0.033µF capacitor that only allowed upper midrange and treble frequencies to pass through. It's widely known as the 'strangle' switch.

The tone control is unconventionally wired, with a 56k resistor across the tone control's input and wiper lugs, and the volume control connected from the wiper. There is much debate about

PHOTO BY CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

4. Fender historian Martin Kelly says, "The first trigger for my interest in Jazzmasters was the cover of the Elvis Costello record *My Aim Is True*." Costello made the model iconic and led its New Wave revival

1963 FENDER JAZZMASTER LAKE PLACID BLUE

This beautiful Jazzmaster from 1963 belongs to Paul Kelly, who explains how he acquired it: "I was living in London in 1984 and I used to go to Denmark Street every day. One day, this blue Jazzmaster suddenly appeared in Andy's guitar shop and I thought, 'Wow, that's amazing,' because I don't think I'd seen a Lake Placid Blue Fender by that point. So I'd go every day and just stare at this guitar, but one day it was suddenly gone and I was like, 'Ah shit!' But I couldn't afford it, it was like £400. Just a week or two after, Martin and I were at The Forum watching Orange Juice with Edwyn Collins – with that guitar!

"Fast forward a few years to 1994, I was playing with Saint Etienne and we were recording at Edwyn's studio, so I asked him, 'You haven't still go that blue Jazzmaster have you?' He said, 'Yeah,' and he let me use it on the session. Afterwards, I said, 'You don't want to sell it do you?' But he said, 'Nah.' He let me borrow it and I took it on tour round Europe and when I got back he said, 'Look if you want to buy it, I'll sell it to you.'"

what this does, but the consensus is that it operates as a treble bleed that also shifts the cut-off frequency of the tone control upwards. With the strangle switch engaged, the resistor allows the tone control to operate more like a bandpass filter and it prevents drastic loss of volume when the tone control is rolled fully back.

Shielding

The Jazzmaster followed hot on the heels of Gretsch's and Gibson's humbucking pickups, but since Leo Fender remained a devotee of single-coil pickups, it became necessary to upgrade the shielding. All of the Jazzmaster's control and pickup cavities were lined with form-fitted brass shielding trays, and the earliest Jazzmasters had gold anodised pickguards. By early 1959, the control rout had been modified to accommodate the extra screws of a new celluloid nitrate pickguard, with a thin aluminium shield installed beneath.

For the Jaguar, Fender only installed flat brass plates in the bottom of the cavities. Metal coverplates were used for all three control cavities, but the shielding was far from complete.

Pickups

To entice jazz players, Fender needed pickups that sounded fatter and warmer. One way to achieve that with a single-coil pickup is to make the coil wider and shallower. Stratocaster coils are around 7/16-inch tall, while Jazzmaster coils are only 1/8-inch, and the coil widths are around 9/16-inch and 1½ inches respectively. This also means that more magnet wire is needed to wind a Jazzmaster pickup with the same number of turns as a Strat pickup, so Jazzmaster DC resistance readings tend to read closer to 8k than 6k. But the higher inductance is more significant.

Typical Fender parts included vulcanised fiberboard flatwork and Alnico V magnetic slugs. The slugs were lightly bevelled at the top and barely protruded beyond the upper flat, but they extended further beyond the bottom flat.

Of all the pre-CBS Fender pickups, Jazzmaster types varied more than any other and offset expert Jim Shine has shared some invaluable information. From 1958 to 1962, the coils were scatter-wound with plain enamel wire that would fill

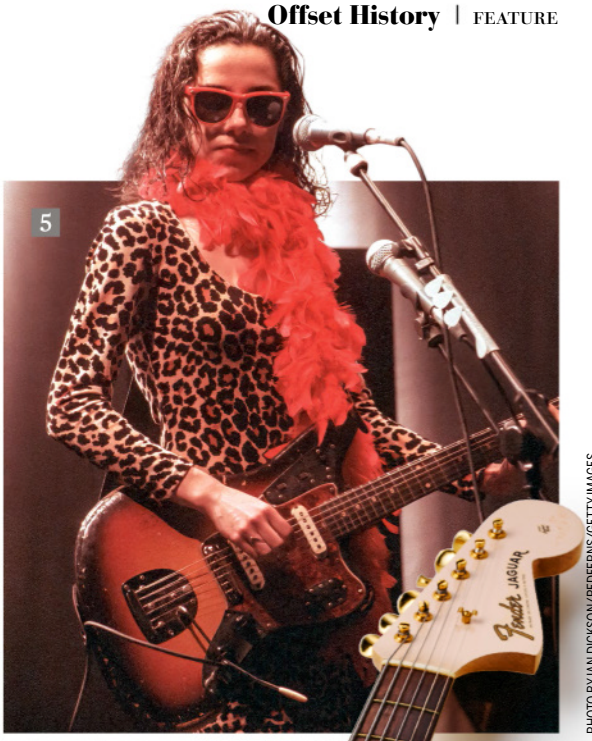


PHOTO BY IAN DICKSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

5. The angular, edgy voice of the Jaguar suited the needs of artists such as PJ Harvey, pictured here on stage in the early 90s. The outsider status of offsets prior to then made them stand out in a decade of change for music

1964 FENDER JAGUAR CUSTOM 'DAISY' PINK

"The story of how this guitar's provenance was exposed is almost as interesting as the provenance itself," says Martin Kelly. On a recent visit to America, Martin was fortunate to meet a gentleman called Glenn Storlie, fresh off a flight from Amarillo where he runs Covenant Recording Studio. Glenn had spent years searching for a rare custom-ordered Fender since its original owner, his aunt Reverend Daisy E Guthrie, sold it in the late 80s – a pink Jaguar with matching headstock and gold hardware.

Martin continues: "My ears pricked up immediately as there's only one known pre-CBS Jag finished that way and it's owned by one of my best pals Phil Hylander. Glenn looked shell-shocked that I knew of its whereabouts and confirmed that the guitar isn't finished in Fender's ridiculously rare Shell Pink by explaining that the Ford Motor Company had created a colour called 'Daisy Pink' especially for his aunt. She was famous in her own right and had the paint sent to Fender. It was a special moment having the story behind that unique instrument, a true Fender custom order, confirmed."

the bobbin. Fender used heavy Formvar magnet wire from 1962 until 1964, and began making the windings less scattered. Both types were potted in an alcohol activated material, which was probably blonde shellac.

During the CBS changeover period of 1964 to 1966, black flatwork changed to grey and Fender started dating the flatwork with stamps, pencil and black marker pen. Some coils during this era were wax-potted, but when Polysol magnet wire was introduced in 1965, Fender reverted to the alcohol-based potting liquid. Plastic insulated leadout wires replaced cloth wires in 1968 and, once again, date codes were stamped.

Leo Fender had concerns about the Jazzmaster's 'broad spectrum' pickups placing excessive demands on valve amplifiers and causing distortion. In many ways, the Jaguar pickup was a return to type, with a narrower and taller coil that "put out a little more punch and a cleaner sound", as Leo put it.

Although in essence a rehash of the Strat design, the Jaguar pickup had non-staggered Alnico V slugs and a solder terminal at each end of the lower flat. The obvious difference was a steel U-shaped yoke that enclosed the pickup. In addition to raising inductance, it was supposed to lessen susceptibility to hum and modify the magnetic field – which it did to an extent, albeit with a small decrease in treble sensitivity.

Two of the 'teeth' are shorter than the others, so there's fractionally less treble loss. The yoke can be fitted either way round, so place the shorter teeth adjacent to the strings you want to brighten up. Heavy Formvar 42 AWG magnet wire was only used in 1962, after which Fender changed to plain enamel wire of the same gauge. The slugs got a stagger in 1964. G

The Jaguar pickup had a narrower and taller coil that "put out a little more punch and a cleaner sound," as Leo put it

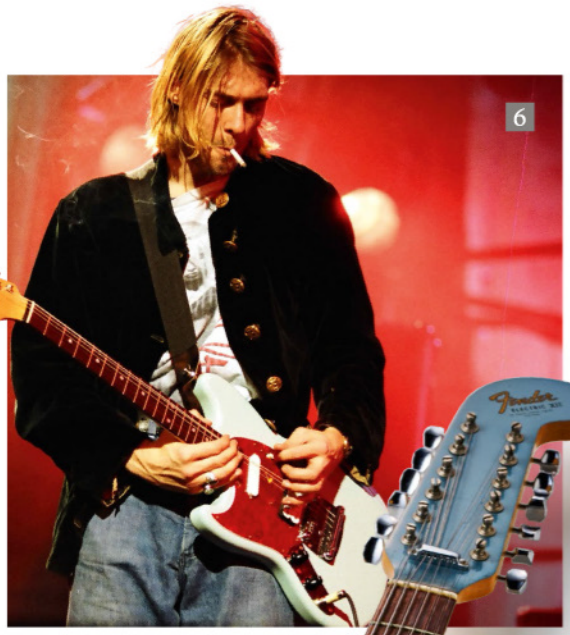


PHOTO BY JEFF KRAVITZ/FILMMAGIC, INC/GETTY IMAGES

6. Kurt Cobain's extensive use of modded offsets, sometimes blending together elements of different models (as with the 'Jagstang') or simply beefing up the pickups, set the tone for offset development through the 90s and into a new century

1966 FENDER ELECTRIC XII ICE BLUE METALLIC

Fender wasn't always first to market with innovations and it was, in fact, Rickenbacker who popularised the electric 12-string, making an inspired choice to present a 1963 prototype to Beatles guitarist George Harrison, who used it on tour in 1964. The advent of The Byrds' jangling Rickenbacker sound on No 1 single *Mr Tambourine Man* set the seal on the 12-string electric's popularity and Fender duly launched its take in June '65 with the Electric XII model.

The new model's body was clearly based on the Jazzmaster outline, though split pickups and a rotary selector (with which you could select pickups individually, together or together but out of phase) gave it its own distinctive sonic and visual identity, along with the impossible-to-miss 'Hockey Stick' headstock. On launch, the standard finish was sunburst with a pearloid guard, which was soon swapped out for faux tortoisehell. Interestingly, Martin Kelly says that an unusually high proportion of Electric XIIs were made in custom colours as a CBS marketing ploy to popularise the model.

ON BRAND

Fender offsets go beyond traditional Jazzmasters and Jaguars: here are six alternatives

Words Stuart Williams

FENDER PLAYER JAGUAR £739

If you're looking for a blend of traditional and modern features at an attainable price point, the Player Series Jaguar will fit the bill. First up, it has the short 610mm (24-inch) scale length, along with the floating vibrato, but the bridge pickup has already undergone the most common mod, replacing the single coil with a Jaguar Humbucker. The switching is simplified, with the rhythm circuit removed and replaced with a three-way blade, but that slider switch on the upper horn will split the humbucker. Get it in a choice of five finishes.
www.fender.com

FENDER VINTERA II '60S BASS VI £1,249

The Fender Bass VI is a curio in the Fender annals, taking Jaguar stylings but doing away with the short-scale performance in favour of the complete opposite: a beyond-baritone 762mm (30-inch) scale length. So, short for a bass, very long for a guitar – and this just about sums up what makes the Bass VI so popular. It includes the resonant floating vibrato, three single coils, and an array of switches to turn each pickup on or off, plus a bass cut. If you want 'different', you'll find it here.
www.fender.com

FENDER KURT COBAIN JAGUAR £1,449

Nothing exemplifies the alt-rock approach to Fender's then-unloved offsets like Kurt Cobain's modded 1965 Jaguar. Fender's Road Worn replica isn't currently in production, but you can get the unscathed NOS version, complete with the mods that were on Kurt's Jag when he bought it. With a Dimarzio PAF and Super Distortion humbucker combo, three-way switch and additional volume control, plus a black chrome Adjusto-Matic bridge and more, it's the ready-made 90s offset.
www.fender.com

FENDER PLAYER PLUS METEORA HH £919

The closest design to an X-shape in the Fender catalogue takes what could be an angular metal guitar and makes it all round edges and curves. It's an offset but not as we know it, with a traditional two-point Fender vibrato and a pair of Fireball humbuckers. The G-style configuration continues with a three-way selector and volume/tone/tone control layout, but it's met by a 648mm (25.5-inch) Strat-style scale length, and that volume pot is an S-1 switch, allowing for global coil-splitting.
www.fender.com

FENDER GOLD FOIL JAZZMASTER £1,299

A trio of mini-humbuckers? On/off slider switches? A Bigsby?! This is Fender's manifestation of a Jazzmaster acting up and sneaking out for a cigarette, and we love it. From the block inlays to the matching headstock face, there's pawn-shop attitude in spades here with the Candy Apple Burst finish, and it's dripping with surfy class when dolled up in its Shoreline Gold guise. Is it one for Jazzmaster traditionalists? Probably not, but the Fender catalogue isn't short of those.
www.fender.com

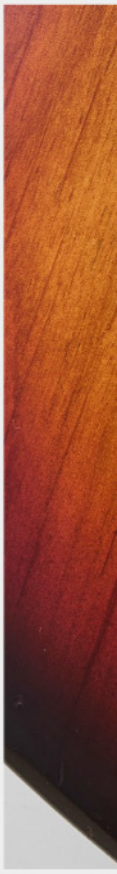
FENDER AMERICAN ACOUSTASONIC JAZZMASTER £1,699

Offering the largest body of Fender's Acoustasonic range, the Jazzmaster might also be our favourite. It's loaded with the same three-pickup configuration as other American Acoustasonics, with an under-saddle piezo, body sensor and the fantastic Shawbucker humbucking pickup, which can be selected and blended for sonic experimentation. It's nothing like a traditional Jazzmaster, nor is it a replacement for your dreadnought. But within that triple-pronged electronic attack lies huge creative potential – and a lot of fun.
www.fender.com

OFFSETUPS

Mod tips and setup tricks to optimise your Jazzmaster and Jaguar guitars

Words Huw Price



Love 'em or loathe 'em, Fender offsets have some challenging quirks and most of these are related to the bridge and vibrato. While the system can work superbly, some knowledge is required to achieve that. This applies whether you have a vintage example, a Japanese reissue or even a Squier. And there are plenty of upgrades and modifications to take your offset to the next level.

1 NECK ANGLE

Jazzmaster and Jaguar strings pass over the bridge saddles with very little break angle between the bridge and the vibrato plate. This minimises friction, but with lighter strings and low action, strings can pop out of their saddle slots and noises often occur behind the bridge. You may also notice a tonal characteristic that's softer and less sustaining than other Fender models.

Many offset fans consider indistinct tone and extraneous noises part of the charm, but if that's not for you, try shimming the neck. You can place a small piece of hardwood veneer in the neck pocket, but it's preferable to use a tapered maple shim that doesn't leave gaps between the neck and body. Google 'guitar neck shims' and you'll see many come in packs of three with 0.25, 0.5 and 1 degree increments; these can be used individually or combined. A shimmed neck requires a higher set bridge, which steepens the break angle, minimises unwanted noises and, hopefully, secures the strings in their saddle slots.

Alternatively, the Buzz Stop is a roller bar that mounts on top of the vibrato plate and increases the break angle over the saddles. It's similar to the front roller on a Bigsby B7, but we'd suggest that you read some reviews before going ahead and buying.

1. The vibrato on Jaguars (and Jazzmasters) can work very well, but lubrication at the nut and sometimes down at the bridge on the saddles will help, too

2 ELECTRIC GLIDE

Friction is the enemy of stable tuning and keeping things running smoothly is imperative with vibrato-equipped guitars. Start at the nut and if you hear any pinging noises when tuning, those slots need filing and finessing. That may be a job for your luthier, but anybody can lubricate a nut. You can use petroleum jelly, soft wax, lip balm, silicon grease or graphite from a soft pencil. Graphite powder works well (although it can get messy) and there are guitar-specific products such as Big Bends Nut Sauce. While you're at it, try lubing the saddles and undersides of any string trees.

> Many offset fans consider indistinct tone part of the charm, but if that's not for you, try shimming the neck

2. Matching headstocks may be a special fature of Fender offsets, but Jazzmaster and Jaguar owners should pay attention to out of sight details such as neck angle, too, for smooth playability

3

3 THE HAMMER TRICK

Offset arms can get loose over time and the 'hammer trick' is a widely accepted fix for optimising the fit. Grip the arm firmly in a vice, leaving about 25mm or so clear of the jaws, and give it one moderately firm tap with a hammer. The object is to introduce a barely perceptible bend that will tighten the fit in the collet. Repeat the procedure if the arm still feels loose, and continue until you achieve the desired feel. If it gets too snug, pop the arm back in the vice and tap it in the opposite direction. If you don't fancy this, check out the Staytrem arm and collet set.

Don't confuse an overly swingable arm with a loose arm housing. If the arm is rattling about, you need to remove your strings, take the vibrato assembly out of the body and tighten the nut that secures the arm housing to the plate.

3. Loose vibrato arms can be cured with careful application of a hammer! Though very much at your own risk, a shrewd tap in the right place can work wonders

4. An upgrade for pots, switches and other components can grant benefits

4

4 ELECTRONICS

Besides the obvious stock pickup upgrades, check out companies such as Mojo Pickups, The Creamery and Monty's for drop-in P-90, Gold Foil, humbucker and high-output alternatives. Asian-manufactured guitars may benefit from upgraded potentiometers and switches, but such is the complexity, we'd suggest a pre-wired assembly such as those made by James' Home Of Tone. Pre-formed brass inserts can be installed to beef up the shielding, or you can also use sticky-back copper foil in the cavities and under the pickguard. With plastic pickguards, we'd prefer a vintage-spec aluminium shield, but they're unnecessary if you have an anodised pickguard.

With so many switches and controls onboard, Jazzmaster and Jaguar wiring can be reconfigured in many ways without irreversibly altering the appearance. Jaguar switches can be changed to a slider or toggle, or repurposed for series/parallel or polarity switching. And if you never use the rhythm circuit, you can bypass it altogether or convert to Les Paul wiring with individual volume and tone controls for each pickup.

> Wiring can be reconfigured in many ways without irreversibly altering the appearance

5

5 BRIDGE BOOSTING

Vintage-style Jazzmaster and Jaguar saddles are made from threaded steel rod, and strings often come out of their slots. Consequently, a lot of offset upgrades focus on the bridge, and players have been installing Mustang saddles and bridges onto Jazzmasters and Jaguars for decades. Graph Tech saddles are another option and promise more stable tuning. Some opt to upgrade the entire bridge, and while the Staytrem looks like a Mustang it has nylon inserts for the saddle screws to eliminate rattles and is available in 7.25-inch and 9.5-inch radiuses.

Elsewhere, the skeletal-looking Mastery bridge is machined from stainless steel and is adjustable in every direction. It keeps strings in place and promises to improve sustain and tuning stability. Not one for the purists but ideal if you want an oddity-free offset.

5. Mustang saddles are sometimes swapped into Jaguars and Jazzmasters, but other upgrade options are available

BIG IN JAPAN

While American grunge bands may have popularised offsets in the 90s, Fender Japan showed the world how radically they could be modified and finished in a dazzling array custom colours, allowing the offset to evolve into a truly contemporary electric. We visit specialist Japanese guitar retailer Gas Station Guitars to find out more

Words Jamie Dickson

Down in rural Somerset you'll find a little slice of Matsumoto, Japan at the premises of Gas Station Guitars. The store, which primarily does business online, imports a wide variety of rare and sought-after Japanese guitars. But, as owner Keith Anderson admits, it's the colourful and quirky offset guitars made by Fender Japan – notably at its famous Fujigen factory – that are his ruling passion. Less wedded to tradition than US Fenders, the guitars made by Fender Japan have always been a riot of colour and modded features, with guitars often made in vanishingly small runs for individual stores. In this hothouse environment, which set a premium on exclusive finishes and unique features, traditional offsets such as the Jazzmaster evolved into truly capable and versatile contemporary electrics. We join Keith to explore how Japanese Fenders provided the missing link between vintage classics and modern do-it-all offsets.

How did you get into selling offsets made by Fender Japan?
"I think a lot of guitarists of my generation got into offsets because it was all we could afford at the time. And I think the same was true for a lot of my favourite bands, like Sonic Youth and Swervedriver when they started out. So if people wonder why indie music is so connected with offsets, it's because we were all poor in the early 90s! But now they've become kind of legendary and, really, Gas Station Guitars has always been about offsets for all of those reasons."

How did the Japanese market for offsets get started?
"Before Fender Japan started making guitars at the Fujigen Gakki plant, a brand called Greco was building Fender clones at Fujigen. They're rare as hen's teeth, but I've got two here – an old Greco Jazzmaster and a Greco Jag as well – and those are basically the prototypes of the Fender Japan offsets that went on to be made by Fujigen. There's a couple of little differences, but they're basically [extremely similar to] the later Fujigen-built Jazzmaster and Jags. So I think Fujigen were building [clone] guitars so well back in the late 70s that's what got Fender interested in having them make their guitars. But they didn't really start rolling out offsets until I think the late 80s. I've got a few from the late 80s and then from around 1990 through '93/'94 onwards, then they started really churning out Jags, Jazzmasters and Mustangs when nobody else was doing them. So I think they almost kickstarted offsets because they were the only ones really building them in any numbers at that time."

1. Long before Japanese production was a twinkle in Fender's eye, the Fujigen Gakki factory was turning out some offset clones under the Greco brand

> "People have always gravitated to guitars made by Fender Japan because you get so much more choice with them"

Japanese Fenders are often very colourful and uniquely spec'd, and they enjoy a reputation for pristine build quality. Has that always been the case?
"There are certain periods with Fender Japan that I love where they got really creative. For example, the CIJ 'Q' Series were built in a period from around 2000 to 2004 during which time, for some reason, there was an explosion of different colours and finishes. There were some great guitars made just in that little serial number period. Then they got a bit more conservative again, but people have always gravitated to guitars by Fender Japan because you get so much more choice with them. The electronics, to be perfectly honest, is the bit that sometimes lets them down – but I think the build quality is the best Fender makes outside the Custom Shop."

There's a real crisp, box-fresh look to Japanese Fenders, partly due to their immaculate poly finishes. Was nitro never a selling point in the Japanese market?
"Yeah, a lot of people don't like the fact that they always use poly finishes as opposed to nitro. A lot of people will ask, 'What Fender Japan models are finished in nitro?' and the answer is very few, really – although I've actually got a couple of examples in right now. But they tend to stick with poly and, generally speaking, the Japanese market loves pristine new guitars.

"Over here when a guitar gets old or you get a bit bored of it, you might mod it, and British players don't tend to mind a few dings and bumps. But that's not really the case in the Japanese market. Over there when your nice, shiny new poly guitar picks up a couple

1980 GRECO 'SUPER REAL' JAZZMASTER CLONE

Ironically, one of the most important factors in Fender starting official production at the Fujigen plant was the fact it had been producing very accurate clones for Japanese brands, a beautiful example of which is this Candy Apple Red Jazzmaster clone from Greco's 'Super Real' series, the company's premium-quality reproduction guitars. The headstock is branded with the Greco logo, but the overall impression is of a very credible Fender reissue – something Fender USA itself was struggling to make accurately at the close of the 1970s. So it was shrewd of Fender to decide 'if you can't beat them, join them' and begin production of official Fender-branded instruments at Fujigen, where all the tooling was already dialled in for accurate reissues of Fender's 50s and 60s designs. Fender Japan did move on from some aspects of the Greco clone specs, but there's no question the Super Real series gave a solid starting point.

of dings, off it goes. They'll even get left on the street sometimes – there's a kind of a junk collection service in Japan and they sweep the streets every morning and pick up all these perfectly decent hi-fi systems and guitars that people have put out just because there's a newer model out.

"So I think the Japanese market prefers poly because it always looks new. And, actually, I don't think Fujigen ever had a permanent nitro spraying facility. That said, they have used nitro on a couple of guitars and I have one here – it's a Heritage Jazzmaster and they pulled out all the stops on it with an anodised gold scratchplate. They also made a Japanese Strat exactly like this with a reverse headstock, which was really cool."

"A lot of people don't like the fact that they always use poly finishes, but the Japanese market loves pristine guitars"

One of the beautiful things about Jazzmasters and Jaguars from Japan is the sheer range of custom colours that are available as well as special-finish options.

"Yes, and one thing I particularly love about Fender Japan is all the guitars with matching headstocks. These days, people are into big colours on an offset and I think that's actually because of Fender Japan – they were the ones in the mid-90s who were doing all these amazing finishes – because the [Japanese market] expected their guitars to be, like, Daphne Blue or Sonic Blue with matching headstocks. That continues to this day – for example, I've got an Inca Silver Jaguar here that's just come out that they've also put neck binding on, which is quite nice. As far as I'm aware, that particular model has only been released for one single store in Japan; no-one else is getting them. So that's going to be as rare as hen's teeth."

How about underneath the finishes – are the tonewoods used what you'd expect of traditional Fenders?

"All the offsets from the 90s, apart from the Mustangs, were

2. Based on a character from a Japanese animated series, the Beck Competition Mustang features the image of a dog to the rear of the guitar's headstock

2007 FENDER MUSTANG COMPETITION 'BECK' EDITION, CAPRI ORANGE

Some specialist versions of Fender offsets made solely for the domestic market in Japan can provide some 'lost in translation moments' for collectors based elsewhere in the world – including this 'Beck' edition Mustang, which, at first glance might seem to be a tribute to US indie-pop innovator Beck Hansen, or even some sort of obscure Jeff Beck signature model. In fact, says Keith, the name derives from a popular Japanese animated series somewhat whimsically entitled *Beck: Mongolian Chop Squad*. "Yeah," Keith Anderson grins. "That model was inspired by the name of the Japanese animé cartoon series and there's a picture of the dog [itself named Beck, which belongs to a main character in] the cartoon on the back of the headstock. They also did a Beck Telecaster as well, which was based on a '68 reissue Tele. But these guitars were really made only for Japan – because they didn't think they were likely to sell outside of the domestic market. The stripes are Dakota Red."

2013 FENDER JGS J-CRAFT JAGUAR HH SPECIAL

"These are really cool," Keith says. "I think they may be the only double-humbucker Jags that they made in Fender Japan. They were part of what's called the J-Craft series – and they're not building them any more. They were built in the 2000s and a little bit beyond. They made a Gunmetal Blue one, like the one you've photographed, but they also made them in Gunmetal Red, which was really nice – it was like a burgundy sunburst kind of thing. They put what they called 'Dragster' humbuckers in them, which sound good, and they had a rosewood fingerboard, plus a matching headstock in the same finish as the body. They made them for a relatively limited amount of time and they don't turn up very often – really nice guitars, though."

alder bodied. More recently, for some reason, they've moved to basswood. I'm not sure why that is – it's not massively popular, over here. I don't mind it personally and it is lighter than [alder]. But I always thought that Fujigen didn't actually like making basswood guitars because they needed different tooling [settings and tolerances] because it's such a soft wood. So all their machines will have had to have been set up again for basswood because previously they were typically always alder – especially through the 90s – and those alder guitars tend to be the most sought-after."

You get the impression Fender Japan has always been a bit of a law unto itself...

"The relationship between the [main US Fender brand and Fender Japan] is really bizarre. I get people messaging me saying, 'I just bought this Fender Japan guitar and it doesn't work in the serial number search box.' And I have to say 'No, that's right – it won't.' Because there's no Fender search tool that's going to give you the exact date of a Japanese Fender. So all you've got to go on is the serial number and that's [only accurate to] within a period of two or three years.

"I love that the Japanese Fenders are a law unto themselves. At Fujigen especially, it often seems like there was little rhyme nor reason to anything they ever did. Sometimes, I'm working on a guitar and I take the neck off and you look at the neck pocket and it's got all these Japanese inscriptions and [when you investigate it] it basically means nothing! I think that's what keeps me interested, to be honest – you just never know what's gonna turn up. My guys in Japan [sourcing guitars] are great. They know the kind of stuff I like, which is offsets. So they find me all the weird and wonderful stuff!" G

www.gasstationguitars.com

> "More recently, the bodies have moved to basswood, so those alder [Japanese offset] guitars tend to be the most sought-after"

PHOTO BY TPG/GETTY IMAGES

3. Kiyonobu 'Inoran' Inoue of the Japanese rock band Luna Sea enjoys a massive fanbase in Japan. Inoran's signature Jazzmaster is typical of special models made for the Japanese market's unique needs

2023 FENDER JAGUAR FSR INCA SILVER

"At the moment, Fender Japan are making a lot of their Jazzmasters and Jaguars with basswood bodies," Keith explains. "But every main production run they do a very limited and exclusive run alongside it with special features, almost to promote that run. These very high-spec ones tend to sell very quickly and then the rest of the run continues. And that was the case with this. It was made alongside the latest Jaguar Traditional run, which was just fairly standard Jags with basswood bodies. But this one was a bit special – it had an alder body, a rosewood fingerboard and obviously the matching Inca Silver headstock. They also put Fender USA Pure Vintage '65 Jaguar pickups in it, which is not common for Fender Japan; they normally stick with their own domestic-made pickups, which have a bit of like a iffy reputation sometimes, although they are getting better. Another cool feature is that it came as standard with a 'barrel' saddle bridge from a Mustang on it, which is a mod that people often do to replace the standard Jaguar bridge saddles."

SET IT OFF

There's more to offset electrics than Leo's designs. These options go beyond the origins of asymmetry

Words Stuart Williams

PJD ST JOHN STANDARD FROM £1,299

Starting at just £1,299, the St John Standard from PJD represents great value from a UK builder. Ordering is easy, too, thanks to a configurator on the PJD website where you can choose your neck (maple/roasted flamed maple), fingerboard (rosewood, maple) and headstock (natural/painted), plus pickups (P-90/humbuckers), tuners (Gotoh vintage/locking) and finish. Talking of which, PJD will apply a 'spray-over', with a three-tone 'burst applied under your top finish, which is then revealed with some light ageing.
www.pjdguitars.com

HAYNES DEMEANOUR FROM £2,600

At first glance, the Demeanour from Haynes might look 'vintage', but dig deeper and it's anything but. American alder for the body and a one-piece mahogany neck – including graphite reinforcement – set the foundation for the compound radius ebony (or rosewood) fingerboard (229mm to 356mm/9.5 to 14 inches). It's available in a base choice of seven metallic finishes, and the pickups, which are made in-house by Haynes, can be customised with soapbar-style singles, humbuckers or a mix of the two.
www.haynesguitars.com

ATKIN MINDHORN £3,499

The Mindhorn from Atkin brings us an obeche body, cut into an offset shape of its own: there's the shallow waist-pinch of a Mustang, the pointed horn of an SG, and we're getting Jazzmaster vibes from the other side. You can pick from a menu of customisation options, including Atkin's house-wound pickups (MH90 single coils or humbuckers), clay dot or abalone block inlays, and tune-o-matic/top-mounted hardtails. Each version comes in a number of nitro-sealed finishes.
https://atkinguitars.com

PRS VELA SEMI-HOLLOW £2,049

Show up to your indie gig with a PRS and you risk getting swung at by a skinny arm clutching a vintage Harmony brochure. Unless it's the Vela. This is PRS's anti-PRS design, except it still carries the high-level craft and build we've come to expect. The violin-like aesthetic is enhanced with traditional f-holes, while electronically it squeezes every last drop of tone out of the HS (DS-01 and Type D single coil) configuration, thanks to the three-way switch and coil-splitting push-pull controls.
www.prsguitars.com

NIK HUBER PIET FROM £2,676

If you want the distinctive resonance of a Jazzmaster floating bridge without the offset body shape, then, according to Nik Huber, this Mastery MV vibrato-loaded Piet (an optional upgrade from the base price) "ain't your dad's pawn shop offset". Mashing up features from the Jazzmaster, Telecaster and Les Paul, there's a lot to love, including the simple but impeccably executed design, matched by the sound of the Gold Foil Häussel P-90 and Broad-N pickups. It's a slight outlier here visually, but we can't argue with the end result.
https://nikhuber-guitars.com

SETH BACCUS ARGONAUT CLASSIC £3,999

The Argonaut looks a bit like the classic offset shape but with the corners squared off. It starts with a lightweight obeche body, the roasted maple neck comes in C or soft-V profiles, and there are three scale options: Jag-style Short (610mm/24 inches), Strat-style Standard (648mm/25.5 inches) and Baritone (728mm/28.65-inch). The choices continue with the bridge and pickups (shown here with Mojo Gold Foil Dual Coils). Our review described this model as "setting a new level for offset design" – and we stand by it.
www.sethbaccus.com

MUSTANG
VOLUME
TONE

Back To The Source

Can't afford a vintage Fender? Neither can we. So until we win the lottery, the Vintera range aims to satisfy our lust. Let's jump on the offset train and go back in time...

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

FENDER VINTERA II '50S JAZZMASTER, '70S JAGUAR & '70S COMPETITION MUSTANG

£1,149, £1,229 & £1,049

CONTACT **Fender Musical Instruments EMEA** PHONE **01342 331700** WEB **www.fender.com**

The second collection of affordable vintage-era Fenders, the Vintera II range, was introduced last year and to say we were impressed with the '50s Telecaster and '60s Stratocaster we reviewed is an understatement. But could we get our hands on the new trendy offset models? Not until now.

While the first wave of Vintera offsets centred on the 60s, the second wave jumps either side with the 50s Jazzmaster and 70s incarnations of the Jaguar and Mustang and – as we reported in that previous review – style aside, the primary changes are the switch back to rosewood fingerboards from pau ferro, a pickup upgrade across all the models and, yes, a slight price increase.

Viewed today, it's quite remarkable how these offsets are not only cohesive designs but how different they are in looks, feel and sound, too. Plus, although we have a '50s Jazzmaster alongside a '70s Jaguar and Mustang, we're not comparing different decades or styles of manufacturing – a leveller that makes a contemporary comparison of 'vintage' Fender designs that much more interesting.

Basic Style

So, while the Jazzmaster retains the classic 'long' Fender scale length of 648mm (25.5 inches) and fret complement of the Telecaster and Stratocaster, the Jaguar and Mustang both drop down to a shorter 610mm (24-inch) scale with an extra 22nd fret. It's a fundamental change that noticeably affects both the feel and sound, and aside from copies, we can't recall any other-brand electrics that use this scale length today. Historically, of course, the Mustang was also originally offered with the even shorter 572mm (22.5-inch) scale like the single-pickup Musicmaster and dual-pickup Duo-Sonic, although from the introduction of the Mustang in 1964 those models were also offered with the longer 610mm scale.

> Viewed today, it's quite remarkable how different these offsets are in looks, feel and sound

Both the Jazzmaster and Jaguar, of course, share the same body outline, which is 42mm thick with its classic smoothly domed forearm contour, ribcage scoop and large edge radius. We can't see any wood – or how many pieces are used – through the opaque finishes of either. The Mustang scrapes into the offset category courtesy of its waist and slightly offset base, and is slightly thinner in depth, closer to 39mm, again with the heavily radiused edges, lighter contouring and those more, well, Fender-like body horns. It's little surprise, then, that the Mustang is the lightest of our trio at 3.66kg (8.05lb); the '50s Jazzmaster is only a little heavier at 3.78kg (8.32lb) and, although the same shape, the '70s Jaguar tops out at 4.04kg (8.89lb), something that actually reflects – we're sure unintentionally – the often lighter stock used in the 50s as opposed to the often heavier wood of that later period. If weight bothers you, it's worth checking.

Obviously, as era-correct replications there's no modern fashionable rounding of the body heel (it's square edged), and all use the classic neckplate and four-screw attachment. The actual neck pockets

appear pretty tight fitting, too. To be picky, there's some slight sideways movement of the neck on the Jaguar, but that's fixed with a quick tightening of those screws.

Neck Work

We'd expect all the maple necks here to be slab-sawn where the end grain is parallel to the headstock face. In fact, both the Jazzmaster's and Mustang's end grain is diagonal, what Fender calls 'rift sawn'. Aside from the slightly larger 70s headstocks here, both the rosewood 'boards are slab-style and unbound, unlike the black-bound maple of the '70s Jaguar with its large black plastic block inlays. Interestingly, the Mustang's dots are slightly larger in diameter than the Jazzmaster's, and the dual 12th-fret dots are placed slightly closer together. All three use the original 'small' fingerboard radius of 184mm (7.25 inches), each has body-end truss rod adjustment, and each uses the same narrow-tall fretwire.

Our three guitars advertise slightly different neck profiles – and dimensionally, though close, reflect some very subtle differences (see the Neck Dimensions chart on page 86). Still, probably due to the lightly

1. While the Jazzmaster pickup retains the slug magnetic rod polepieces of previous Fender designs, the large shallow coil was a big difference. At output, the DCRs are 7.82kohms in the bridge position and 7.98k at the neck

2. The dual-circuit concept was introduced on the Jazzmaster and still confuses many of us today. These thumb-wheel volume and tone controls comprise the 'rhythm' circuit, which only works on the neck pickup

3. Very different from previous Fender designs, the Jazzmaster's bridge rocks as the vibrato is moved. Consequently, it's not fixed to the body. It's also one reason why the Jazzmaster and Jaguar sound like they do

The Jazzmaster's mix sound is probably worth the experience on its own – the high-end detail transports us back in time in glorious fashion

tinted polyurethane gloss of the neck back, there's more commonality than you might think. The narrow tall fretwire (measured at 2.08mm wide by 1.09mm high) isn't particularly high, but the maple 'board of the Jaguar avoids that almost 'fretless wonder' feel of many from that period.

Metalwork

Probably the most polarising aspect of the Fender offset is the bridge and separate vibrato of the Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Today, there's a whole industry of aftermarket 'fixes' for the original designs and, as we detail elsewhere in this issue, there are plenty of tricks in terms of how you can set them up. We can easily debate the failings of the original design, but for many players that's precisely the draw: the otherworldly resonance of the strings behind the bridge and the ability to bend them with some swoops from the light-feeling vibrato.

The lack of mass of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge also plays its part in the offset sound here and many players actually prefer the sound and performance of the Mustang's saddles, which aren't individually height adjustable: the domed radius is created as the E-string pair has the smallest diameter, the G and D string pair the largest, with the B and A pair in between. These saddles also have quite a deep groove to hold the string more firmly in place. Then there's the vibrato's large string anchor block, which also provides more mass.

The 'trem-stop' of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge, when set correctly, will prevent up-bend and also keep you in-tune (ish) should you break a string. The arms simply push-fit, whereas on the Mustang vibrato you can set the swing tension of the Mustang's arm, thanks to a small Allen key, or lock it in place.

OFFSET NECK DIMENSIONS (in mm)

	'50s JAZZMASTER	'70s JAGUAR	'70s MUSTANG
Width at nut	42.07	42.4	41.8
Width at 12th fret	52	51.7	51.4
Depth at 1st fret	20.9	20.9	21.3
Depth at 12th fret	23.5	24.4	23.4

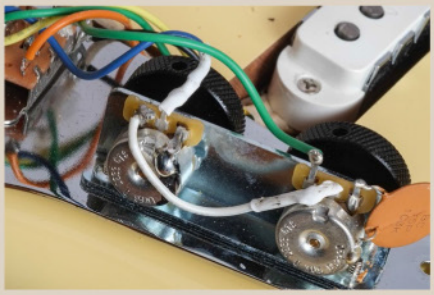
UNDER THE HOOD Circuits? Let's take a look, Jaguar-style

If the Jazzmaster's wide and shallow single coil was meant to add depth and a more 'jazz-like' tonality, you could easily state that it was an abject failure. The Jaguar's pickups are more Fender-like with their narrower coils, but also the U-shaped sawtooth-sided metal surrounds (which increase inductance) subtly alter the magnetic field and, in theory, add some shielding.

But the Jaguar also uses a slightly expanded version of the Jazzmaster's circuit. So we get 1meg-ohm audio taper volume and tone pots, and a large .01µF (103k) ceramic disc tone capacitor. The rhythm circuit uses mini-pots: 1meg-ohm for the volume and 50k (both linear taper) for the tone, with the same tone cap as the lead circuit. That strangle switch simply uses a .003µF (302Z) cap wired in series.

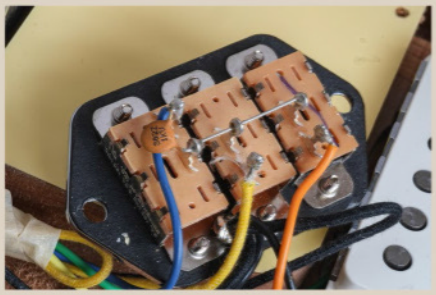
Another unique feature that's not on the Jazzmaster (or any other guitar this writer has ever seen) is an extra 56k resistor on the lead circuit tone control whose purpose is debatable. In the absence of an explanation from Fender, Bare Knuckle Pickups' Tim Bartle offered: "[It is] adding a secondary variable series resistor that is controlling the amount of signal that gets to the tone control between the output of the pickups and the master volume and tone controls. It's kind of like a quasi-tone control and, of course, the circuit is all working together interactively." In short, it's a simple addition that has quite a complex effect.

The Jaguar's tone certainly works in a different fashion to the Jazzmaster's, which acts as a normal tone control would. On the Jaguar, as you turn the control down it thins the sound a little, but even fully off we don't get the extreme treble drop-off. Then, a little like a 50s-wired tone control, as you pull the tone back up it seems to subtly increase the volume, too. It also seems to work slightly differently with the strangle switch engaged.



The rhythm circuit of the '70s Jaguar – with its old-school jazz feel – uses side-mounted mini pots

The lead circuit's 1meg-ohm pots are full size – plus, note that added resistor on the tone control



Here, you can see the three two-position slide switches with the small capacitor for the strangle function

None of the three bridges is fixed to the body, either. To allow them to 'rock' as the vibrato is moved, each has two legs that sit in circular metal ferrules sunk into the body and pivot on a sharp pointed screw that passes through each of those legs.

Each of our trio also uses split-post tuners, the 70s models with the 'F' logo backs, while the Mustang's have plastic buttons. They use a single 'butterfly' string retainer on the top two strings, although, oddly, there's no spacer on the Mustang's tree, which means those top strings are pulled down behind the nut at a much steeper angle.

Although the Jaguar was very similar to the Jazzmaster, one difference is the pickup switches for the 'lead' circuit. Here, we get an on/off slide switch for each pickup, plus a third one for the 'strangle' function

Control Chaos

The Jazzmaster introduced the dual 'rhythm' and 'lead' circuit concept that has befuddled us guitarists for the past 66 years. It is, in fact, not that complicated and can be quite useful. The key lies with that two-position slide switch at the top tip of the one-piece scratchplate: pushing it in towards the neck you have the 'lead' circuit where the three-way toggle selects either or both pickups, and the volume and tone work as we all know. Easy. Move that slide switch away from the neck and you introduce the 'rhythm' circuit: the neck pickup only with its two thumb-wheel controls for volume (the upper wheel) and tone.

The later Jaguar uses pretty much the same dual-circuit concept, but instead of the lead circuit's toggle switch we get

4. Plenty of players enjoy this vibrato, not least its smooth light travel that's perfect for those evocative shimmers. It top-loads onto the body, of course, requiring no rear-routing for any springs, like the Stratocaster

5. These narrower single coils are more Fender-like, and one reason for the sawtooth metal side and baseplates was to reduce the hum pick-up of the Jazzmaster's single coils. Measured at output, the DCRs read 6.14kohms (bridge) and 6.36k (neck)

6. Still a two-piece design, the Mustang's vibrato has a faster feel that takes some skill to match the languid action of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar. Nevertheless, many players prefer the bigger, solid saddles of the Mustang

individual pickup on/off switches *and* the lower-placed 'strangle' switch, effectively a high-pass filter that attenuates the low-end. It also introduces the four-piece scratchplate where both circuits' controls are mounted on chrome-covered metal plates, as are those three lead circuit slide switches, leaving the more central piece as a plastic laminate. Style over substance? Well, the Jaguar's metal control plates do mean it's easy to investigate any wiring issues without removing the entire scratchplate and bridge as on the Jazzmaster, plus experiments with things such as capacitor types and values is loads easier. Something to bear in mind if you like to tinker.

Our Mustang has just one circuit and is the epitome of Leo Fender's modular approach to guitar manufacturing. Unlike the other two offsets, the pickups are suspended on the plastic scratchplate, as opposed to direct mounting to the body, and the bridge doesn't sit over it. Here, the two slightly angled black-covered single coils are each controlled by their own three-position slide switch. In the centre position the pickup is off, both outer

6

positions are on, but if you engage the upper 'on' position of the neck pickup with the lower 'on' position of the bridge – or vice versa – they're out of phase.

Finally, there's another chromed metal control plate to hold the volume, tone and output jack, slightly smaller than the one used on the Jaguar. While the Mustang's metal and plastic 'plates line up perfectly, the Jaguar's rotary control plate is slightly misplaced and doesn't quite fit into the tortoiseshell as neatly as it should.

Feel & Sounds

While many contemporary offsets simply borrow the outline, there's a lot more to these original recipes when it comes to their sounds. The Jazzmaster here is almost a shock after our reference Strats and Teles. It's definitely a Fender voice, but it's possibly excessively bright until you dial it in a little and pull back the metallic smash of the attack. Pulling back the volume and tone certainly rounds things out a little and there's some welcome depth to the attack, but it's all underpinned by not only the seemingly shorter sustain (which adds to the plunk) but the original fingerboard radius – and those pretty small frets make things less fluid than we're used to. The mix, the only hum-cancelling position on the guitar, is probably worth the experience on its own: definitely more Tele-like, but the high-end detail, not to mention a few light shimmers from the vibrato and with some added lashings of reverb, transports us back in time in quite glorious fashion. The rhythm circuit does nod towards the instrument's name, pulling back those highs a little more on the neck pickup only – but lounge-smooth it ain't.

> Our Mustang has just one circuit and is the epitome of Leo's modular approach to manufacturing

Strapping on the Jaguar, it initially feels like a toy. We pretty much kept volume and tone full up (see Under The Hood on page 87) and it's certainly got a darker voicing that's more Gibson-esque, if you like, but we have that different sustain and a fuller neck profile in higher positions, not to mention the slippery gloss feel of the fingerboard, which widen the differences. Here, though, the rhythm circuit really hits the old-school jazz mark, whereas on the Jazzmaster it's still a little scooped in the midrange in comparison.

The longer we play, the more the Jaguar works its magic, even though quick pickup changes require some dexterity and thought. If only we had that toggle switch! The extra 'strangle' switch is relatively subtle, too; it does clean up the low-end a little, but it seems more for occasional use than an essential feature.

Onto the Mustang and strapping on this model is even more odd than the Jaguar because, in combination with the shorter scale, its smaller body and lighter weight enhance the toy-like feel. To be honest, though, although the pickups are far from hot, if you live in a Tele and Strat world then the voicing here is more familiar. Selecting pickups is harder than on the Jaguar, and there's plenty of chance you'll accidentally

7. One unique aspect of the Mustang is this pair of pickup-dependent slide switches to allow you to mute either, or (with both on) flip the phase. You can't do that on the Jazzmaster or Jaguar

8. Much more Fender-like than either of the other offsets, these are effectively flush pole single coils. They do give a more recognisable Fender voicing, albeit with the shorter scale playing its part. Measured at output the DCRs are 5.62kohms (bridge) and 5.6k (neck)

mute the guitar or put the pickups out-of-phase. Still, while the sound is thinned, kick in something like an MXR Phase 90 and it's a beautiful shimmery voice; with some blunderous fuzz or some even quite metal distortion, it has bags of attitude, too.

The more we play, the more we get used to the feel and scale length. We preferred it in that regard to the Jaguar, even though the Mustang's vibrato is very different: a light waggle here brings fast pitch change and you really have to use it carefully unless you're keen to alarm your audience and bandmates. Also, if you lose the necessary Allen key, or worse the grub screw drops out (the only way to keep the arm in place), then you've got a problem.

Verdict

While spending time with this trio is definitely a time-warp jive, it reminds us just how 'out-there' these designs were at the time of their release. Now, at this Vintera II level, for the most part they're clearly reproduced with keen attention to detail and none of the issues that can come with buying original vintage pieces. Any mods you choose to make or 'improved'

FLEXIBLE ERAS

The Vintera's decade-specific models have plenty of different styles to be inspired by

Our '50s Jazzmaster doesn't have much of a decade to draw on as it was only introduced in 1958, and the Vintera II version shoots for the original style with its nine-screw anodised aluminium scratchplate, which was replaced in 1959 with a 13-screw white or tortoiseshell laminated plastic 'plate.

The Jaguar was pulled from production in 1975, so our '70s Jaguar reflects more the end-point than the start of the model back in 1962. Maple fingerboards returned after the CBS takeover, although vintage examples are apparently rarer than rosewood. Originally, it would have had a dot-inlaid rosewood 'board, which was bound from 1965 then block inlays were added the following year.

Another example of CBS style is the Mustang's 'Competition' stripes, which featured from 1968 to '73; the guitar itself enjoyed a good run until 1981. On its introduction in 1964, as a bridge between Fender student and higher-end models, the Mustang had a slab body like the Duo-Sonic; contours came a little later on these lower-end models.

aftermarket parts you add won't affect your vintage investment, either.

Which one would we shoot for? Despite the improvements that the Jaguar brought, our sample certainly isn't light in weight and the maple 'board won't be to everyone's taste in either looks or playability. Then there's the short scale to get used to, which, like the Mustang, does impart a rather toy-like feel to begin with. That said, its sounds are more than worth investigating.

The full-scale Jazzmaster feels the most 'normal' in that regard. Even if you have no plans in place to use the 'rhythm' circuit, once you tame the high-end, well, there's a reason why this guitar has eventually become quite a classic – it has a different voice and feel from your Tele and Strat.

And although the Mustang's vibrato doesn't have that classic smooth feel of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar, the more comfortable sounds with out-of-phase potential made this lightweight model get way more play time than we'd expected.

There's character in plenty here and, while probably not for the journeyman function band musician, we'd wager there's a song or two to be found in these. G

FENDER VINTERA II '50S JAZZMASTER

PRICE: £1,149 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, late '50s C shape, bolt-in
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Synthetic bone
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white dot inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius
FRETS: 21, vintage tall
HARDWARE: 6-saddle vintage-style bridge with vibrato tailpiece vintage-style tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: 2x vintage-style '50s single-coil Jazzmaster pickups. Lead Circuit master volume, master tone and 3-way toggle pickup selector switch. Lead/Rhythm circuit slide switch. Rhythm circuit thumb-wheel controls for neck pickup volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.78/8.32
RANGE OPTIONS: Gold Foil Jazzmaster (£1,369) has 3x GF single coils with Bigsby. American Performer Jazzmaster (£1,389) has a single circuit with Stratocaster vibrato
LEFT-HANDERS: No. American Professional II Jazzmaster is available left-handed at £1,909
FINISHES: Desert Sand (as reviewed), Sonic Blue – gloss polyester body, gloss urethane neck

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Cleanly built repro of the first Jazzmaster with all its quirks in place; most Fender-like offset here with its full scale

CONS Bright voicing might need taming; the original 'board radius and small frets won't be for everyone

FENDER VINTERA II '70S JAGUAR

PRICE: £1,229 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, late '70s C shape, bolt-in
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT: Synthetic bone
FINGERBOARD: Bound maple, black block inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius
FRETS: 22, vintage tall
HARDWARE: 6-saddle vintage-style bridge with vibrato tailpiece, vintage F-stamped tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: 2x vintage-style '70s single-coil Jaguar pickups. Lead Circuit master volume, master tone and 3-way toggle pickup selector switch. Lead/Rhythm circuit slide switch plus individual pickup on/off slide switches and high-pass filter switch. Rhythm circuit thumb-wheel controls for neck pickup volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.04/8.89
RANGE OPTIONS: Kurt Cobain Jaguar (£1,469) adds a pair of DiMarzios, tune-o-matic-style bridge and modded circuit
LEFT-HANDERS: Kurt Cobain Jaguar (£1,469)
FINISHES: Vintage White (as reviewed), Black – gloss polyester body, gloss urethane neck

8/10

PROS Crisply built repro of later period Jaguar with expanded features; more jazz-like voicing from the rhythm circuit and shorter scale length

CONS Not everyone will enjoy the short scale or gloss-finished 'board with old-style radius and small frets; on the heavy side

FENDER VINTERA II '70S COMPETITION MUSTANG

PRICE: £1,049 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on
BODY: Mahogany back with maple top (w/ quilt maple veneer facing) and shallow violin carve
NECK: Maple, early '70s C shape, bolt-in
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT: Synthetic bone
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white dot inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius
FRETS: 22, vintage tall
HARDWARE: 6-saddle vintage-style Mustang vibrato tailpiece, vintage F-stamped tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm
ELECTRICS: 2x vintage-style '70s single-coil Mustang pickups. Individual pickup on/off switches, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.66/8.05
RANGE OPTIONS: American Performer Mustang (£1,379) retains the classic features but with modern fingerboard radius and 3 satin colours
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISHES: Competition Orange (as reviewed), Competition Burgundy – gloss polyester body, gloss urethane neck

8/10

PROS Lightweight, more compact offset with the most Fender-like pickup voicing, plus out-of-phase potential; strangely alluring!

CONS Like the Jaguar, the short scale length won't suit everyone, nor the playability; the vibrato is less smooth in use

Go For Gold

It's time to hang out the bunting as Taylor celebrates its 50th anniversary with some very special limited-edition instruments, including this superb Grand Auditorium acoustic

Words David Mead
Photography Phil Barker

TAYLOR 50TH ANNIVERSARY 814CE BUILDER'S EDITION £5,939

CONTACT **Taylor Guitars** PHONE **00800 23750011** WEB **www.taylorguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1 Is it really 50 years?
Indeed, it is! Bob Taylor was a mere 19 years old when he founded Taylor Guitars with Kurt Listug in 1974. They met while working at a guitar store in San Diego called American Dream and when the owner announced he was selling up they bought the business and began the journey that led to the global brand we know today.

2 So, what's so special about this particular guitar?
Well, when it's your 50th anniversary you're entitled to make a bit of a fuss about it and the guitars that Taylor is releasing to celebrate are all spec'd out in special party duds and limited to 1,974 instruments per model worldwide.

3 Are they making any other anniversary models?
Yes, there's a whole range, covering every price point from the American Dream AD14ce-SB LTD at £2,375 to the top-of-the-range PS24 LTD Koa at £7,559. If you're interested in joining in the celebrations, Taylor's website has details of all the anniversary fun.

We've often said in these pages how the early to mid-1970s seemed to be a breeding ground for some very innovative ideas in the music world. Those years saw the rise of progressive rock from bands like Yes, ELP, King Crimson, Pink Floyd and Genesis, after all. But there were shake-ups in the manufacturing industry, too. How about the first Boss chorus pedal and Marshall's Master Volume amplifiers, for instance?

But while all this was going on, a music store in San Diego saw the fusion of two minds that gave rise to a global acoustic guitar brand – Taylor Guitars. Bob Taylor and co-founder Kurt Listug were working in what has been described as a "hippie guitar store" called American Dream, owned by Sam Radding; when Sam decided to sell up, the pair teamed up and bought the business. Fuelled by a mutual love for guitar building, Bob and Kurt began the transformation from local music store to what was to become one of the world's best-loved acoustic guitar manufacturers.

There's been a lot of water under the bridge since those days – and some of that water was to yield timber for acoustic guitar

The 814ce's top is sinker redwood – "cedar on steroids" according to Taylor!

THE RIVALS

Obviously, the fact that this guitar is a special limited edition adds a little spice to the proceedings as it launches the prospect of collectibility into the equation. But while you might expect any anniversary model to be an attractive proposition for those hoping their instrument will hold, or even accrue, value given the passage of time, this isn't always the case.

But if the £6k asking price is your ballpark figure for a new acoustic then there's a plenitude of models on offer. It's always good to look at the big guns first and both Martin and Gibson don't disappoint. Check out the former's Standard Series D-41 (£5,799), or if a performance cutaway is more your thing then the SC range offers models from around £3,749 up to £8,423. Gibson's Songwriter acoustics can be found for just over the £3k mark, or if something a little more Las Vegas appeals, then the Elvis SJ-200 will set your wooden heart a-thumping at £5,199.

It would also be worth looking in Taylor's own backyard if the collectibility factor isn't that important to you. Take a look at the Builder's Edition K14ce at £5,499, for example.

In this price range a bespoke build isn't out of the question, either, and there's a wealth of choice here from builders like Fylde, Atkin, Kinkade and Tom Sands who would build you your dream instrument.

1. One of the deluxe features on the guitar is the scratchplate, which has been fashioned from Indian rosewood

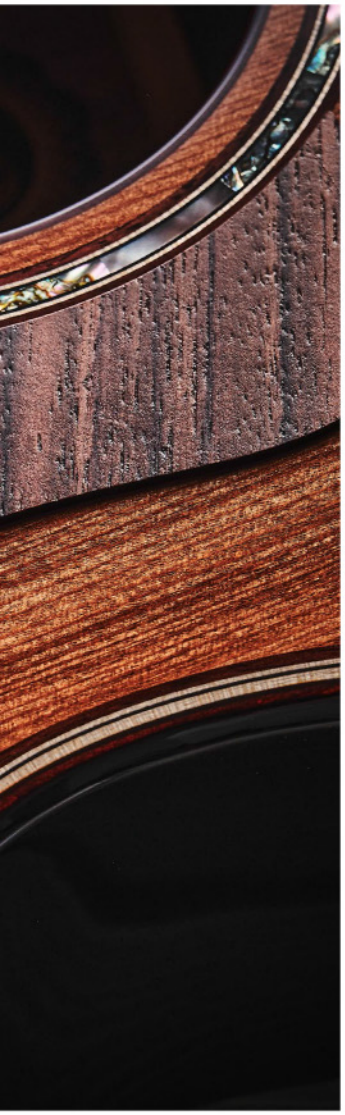
2. The body's rolled edges and armrest bevel bring the player to another level of comfort

tops, but more of that in a moment – and Taylor is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year in style. Throughout the year the company will release what it describes as "a curated collection of limited-edition guitars celebrating the diversity of the Taylor line", and the fun has already started with the guitar before us now.

Limited to 1,974 apiece, the anniversary instruments so far include the Sitka/Walnut American Dream AD14ce-SB LTD right up to the flagship PS24ce LTD, which features some exquisite highly figured master-grade koa for its top, back and sides. Our Builder's Edition 814ce sits in the midrange, as far as pricing is concerned, but is nonetheless turned out in sinker redwood and Indian rosewood and includes what Taylor tells us is "an ultra-premium twist on our player-favourite BE 814ce..."

If you find yourself wondering what on earth 'sinker redwood' can be, it's basically thanks to the US logging industry of yore. Around 100 years or so ago, the industry took advantage of the rivers in Northern California to float tree trunks downstream to the saw mills. It was a cheap form of transport, but there were casualties in that some of the logs sank to the bottom of the river and were considered gone and beyond reach. Fast forward to the technological future we now enjoy and this submerged timber is not only salvageable but is highly prized as a guitar-making wood. Why? Well, we're not biochemists, but our understanding is that the minerals in the riverbed transforms the timber, lending it, says Taylor, "a rich spectrum of variegation, the result of colours uniquely imparted from silt and the mineral-rich water", and that it produces "a tight grain with nice cross-grain stiffness, so it will tend to have a fairly bold response, with a brilliance complemented by warm overtones similar to cedar". To put it plainly, tonally speaking, sinker redwood is like "cedar on steroids".

In order to see exactly what effect being submerged for a century or so has had on the top wood for this 814ce, we'd better, erm, dive in and take a closer look...



This very special 814ce Builder's Edition celebrates Taylor's 50th anniversary and only a total of 1,974 are being made available

First of all, let's take a quick tour around the rest of the components that go to make up this very special 814ce. We've already discussed the redwood top, which is a ruddy brown in colour with darker seams streaking its surface. The pickguard is fashioned from nicely figured rosewood, which adds a touch of luxury to the guitar's top, as does the rosette, which comprises a single ring of green abalone inlays bound with rosewood, maple and black purfling. A closer look at the soundhole itself reveals a ring of dark rosewood lining the inner surface of its circumference. And the classy appointments don't end there. The edges of the guitar's top have been 'chamfered' (rounded over would be a better description), and both the cutaway and armrest are bevelled to enhance player comfort. No sharp edges to dig into your arm in this vicinity!

Looking through the soundhole, there's a reminder that this is a 50th anniversary model by virtue of a sticker on the edge of the label inside – and while we're here it's worth mentioning that the 814ce benefits from Taylor's innovative V-Class bracing system. This particular bracing pattern, the brainchild of Taylor's current CEO and chief designer Andy Powers, enhances tone and sustain and has proven itself in the past on the many Taylors that have passed through our hands.

> It's easy to hear the influence the sinker redwood top has had on the richness of the entire tonal spectrum

Turning our attention to the back and sides of the guitar, we find Indian rosewood as a foil to that redwood top. Indian rosewood needs no introduction because its reputation as a superb tonewood is well known. Here, its presence is enhanced by a sort of darkburst effect to the back, adding yet another touch of grandeur to the anniversary proceedings.

The 814's neck is neo tropical mahogany and the fretboard is Crelicam ebony from West Africa with Taylor's 'Element' fingerboard inlays. Whereas you might expect the ebony here to be jet black, it has a brownish hue to it instead. This might come as a surprise to hardcore traditionalists, but not all ebony is black and a lot of fine timber has been discarded in the past because guitar manufacturers have insisted on using the black variety, but ecological concerns – something very close to Taylor's core beliefs – mean that the equally fine brownish variety is now in full use.

Another surprise in the same region is that the neck is scarf-jointed below the headstock. Some purists believe this to be a mark of cost-cutting and, well, cheapness. But not only has scarf-jointing been proven to add strength to this very vulnerable area, it's also another sound ecological process as, simply put, it conserves wood.

The 44.4mm wide Tusq nut sits under the headstock and antique-looking brass coloured Gotoh tuners, the 20 medium frets

3. The back and sides are made from Indian rosewood with a subtle dark edgeburst

4. The Gotoh tuners are Taylor-branded with an attractive antique brass look to them

5. Inside the soundhole you'll find a very special reminder of Taylor's 50th

are finely finished and smooth as silk to the touch, and everything here yells class and quality. The 814ce certainly looks the business – let's hear how it sounds.

Feel & Sounds

It's safe to say that every Taylor that has come our way has shared one characteristic in that the feel of the necks and general setup are always spot on fresh out of the box, and that's certainly the case here. The neck profile is a comfortable wide-ish shallow C that sits in the hand perfectly and the satin finish feels superb and enhances smooth movement of the hand up and down the playing area. It's a nicely balanced guitar, too, with no hint of neck heaviness when played sitting down.

Tonally speaking, everything you need is here. There is a richness and warmth to the entire tonal spectrum and it's easy to hear the influence that the sinker redwood top has had in this department. As we've said, Taylor describes it as a sort of turbo-charged cedar and we'd agree. Whereas cedar is suited to a light touch – and as such is known to be a fingerstylist's favourite in this respect – the redwood brings an

5

additional shimmering edge to the sound. Played gently it responds well, producing a very melodic subtlety without a trace of wimping out. But switching over to bashing out some campfire chords you get the impression that there's still a reserve of toneful power waiting to be tapped into. It can be loud but never brash and shrieky. It's quite likely that the years will favour the tone even more as the timbers wake up and align themselves, but what's here already is pretty impressive.

The 814ce comes equipped with Taylor's Expression System 2, which we've always found to be one of the easiest pickup/preamp combos to use. True to form, when we put the 814 through our trusty AER Compact 60 we kept the preamp controls on both the guitar and the amp completely flat and the sound was perfectly usable as it was. In other words, there was plenty of room for individual tweaking to taste. The electric sound represented what we had previously heard acoustically very well, meaning that you're ready to take to the stage with the guitar pretty much straight out of the case and with the absolute minimum of fuss.

Its ability to suit everything from gentle fingerstyle to vigorous strumming means that it would be a welcome addition to any collection

Verdict

Needless to say, we are very impressed with this special anniversary Builder's Edition. From its good looks and thoughtful features (you never know you need a bevelled armrest until you've tried a guitar that has one), to its ability to suit everything from gentle fingerstyle to vigorous strumming means that it would be a welcome addition to any guitar collection.

Obviously, price has to be taken into account and at just shy of £6k it's not by any means affordable for the mainstream. But factor in its status as a limited edition and, hence, a potential collector's item, not to mention the superb fit and finish and those abundant flashes of luxury, and you might see the 814 as not only an investment but as a steadfast musical companion.

TAYLOR 50TH ANNIVERSARY 814CE BUILDER'S EDITION

PRICE: £5,939
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Auditorium
TOP: Sinker redwood
BACK/SIDES: Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 117.5mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Neo-tropical mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm
TUNERS: Gotoh
NUT/WIDTH: Tusq/44.4mm
FINGERBOARD: West African Crelicam ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony (Micarta saddle)/54mm
ELECTRICS: Taylor Expression System 2
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.13/4.7
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Other 50th Anniversary guitars in the Taylor range include the 314ce LTD (£3,119), AD14ce-SB LTD (£2,375), PS14ce LTD Figured Urban Ironbark/Striped Sinker Redwood (£3,839), PS14ce LTD Figured Claro Walnut/Western Red Cedar (£6,959) and the PS24 LTD Koa (£7,559)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Gloss

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Superbly wrought acoustic with limited-edition appeal and luxury appointments

CONS Very little to declare – the price will probably deter many would-be purchasers

Deep Space

Boss expands its 200 Series range of effects with a long-awaited reverb pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

BOSS RV-200 £259

CONTACT **Roland UK** WEB **www.boss.info/uk**

What You Need To Know

1. **This pedal has a familiar look to it...** It's the latest in the Boss 200 Series range and follows the same form factor as some previous pedals. This time it's a reverb pedal.

2. **Doesn't Boss have enough reverb pedals already?** Well, there's the compact RV-6 and the full-featured RV-500, but up until now there's been nothing between the two. The RV-200 bridges that gap somewhat by providing plenty of capability but remaining very pedalboard friendly for a twin-footswitch unit.

3. **Has it got all the 'verbs I'll need?** Quite possibly. It's got an across-the-board selection from the staple stuff to esoteric ambiences, including an all-new Arpverb type.

Boss has had the delay and modulation genres amply covered in both its double-footswitch 200 Series and triple-footswitch 500 Series pedals for some time, but there's only been the one large multi-reverb pedal in the RV-500. Now, however, it's time to meet its smaller sibling, the RV-200. This pedal gives you access to 12 different reverb types that you can dial in quickly from an uncomplicated hands-on interface, 127 onboard memories, a pair of footswitches that can be assigned to a range of different tasks if desired, plus various hook-up options in mono or stereo.

In Use

Initial impressions of the RV-200 are of excellent ease of use with everything you need for everyday operation instantly available from the front panel. There are certain settings, such as configuring different functions for the footswitches, that can be changed from a menu that's accessed by holding down the Density and Memory buttons, then selected and adjusted with the Time knob. Still, a nicely appointed default configuration straight out of the box means that you may not even need to go there.

All 12 reverb types are adjusted by dedicated knobs for Reverb Time, Pre-Delay and Effect Level (dry/wet mix), plus Low and High EQ (both with boost and cut), and there's also a Parameter knob that adjusts one thing specific to each reverb type. For the Room reverb, it selects four different room sizes, while for the Modulate reverb it sets the modulation depth in a range from 0 to 100. In addition, you can set six different degrees of reverb density using a front-panel button, subtly thickening the reverb trail.

1. You choose from the 12 reverb types with this rotary switch and each name is briefly shown in the display when you switch to it. The Parameter knob adjusts a parameter that is specific to the selected reverb type – all values are clearly shown in the display as you tweak

THE RIVALS

One multi-reverb in a similar price range is the Electro-Harmonix Oceans 12 (£259), which also packs 12 reverb types but features two simultaneous, independent stereo reverb engines that can be run in series or parallel; it has 24 presets. If you have a bit more to spend, here are a couple more with 12 reverb types: Strymon's BigSky (£469) is the multi-reverb of choice for many pro players, but it's a large triple-footswitch pedal; more pedalboard-friendly is the Source Audio Ventris (£399), which offers two totally independent reverbs that can be used singly or combined in parallel, in series or Left/Right.

2. The red LEDs (1, 2, 3, 4) indicate which of the pedal's first four presets is selected. The first green LED shows you're in manual mode. No lit LEDs denote a memory somewhere between 5 and 127 (the actual preset number can be seen in the main display)

3. The Memory footswitch (or button) scrolls through Manual mode and the four presets by default (you can set by which direction in the menu). You can set it up to scroll through a larger number if desired

4. The Density button scrolls through the different amounts of density, indicated by how many LEDs are lit (0 to 5). A long press locks the controls to prevent accidental operation of the panel

With this amount of tweaking available, it's good that there are 127 onboard user memories to which you can save your favourite sounds. Four memories are available by default on the front panel, making things nicely manageable, and you can increase this up to the full 127.

Besides scrolling through presets, the Memory footswitch can be held down to put it into Hold mode in which a press will sample a portion of what you played and let it playback continuously, allowing you to play guitar over it. Besides Hold, you can alternatively configure Fade, Warp and Twist facilities for different outcomes.

So, what of the reverb types? Well, the four traditional staples are all here – Room, Hall, Plate and Spring – and all do their job with plenty of variation to dial in what you need. Beside the four different room sizes, you get Small, Medium and Large Halls that give you an accurate rendition of the size of the emulated space, while the Plate reverb has adjustable damping via the Parameter knob, which does a great job of blending the sound exactly into your tone. Next, Spring offers you the choice of one, two or three springs. The single spring sounds boxy and has a bongy resonance to it, creating a lo-fi vibe that some might find a use for, but we preferred the two- and three-spring renditions of an amp's onboard spring tank.

If you like sustained pad sounds sitting behind your tone, the Shimmer reverb has a bright, metallic cloud of upper-octave harmonics with adjustable shrillness. More engaging is the newly developed Arpverb, said to produce "dreamlike reverberations based on an arpeggio sound theme". Here, sympathetic pitch-shifted arpeggios are generated for interesting harmonic movement to complement your sound. Adjustable attack via the Parameter knob emphasises the individual notes in the sequence for a pleasant trickle of sparkle and chime. For a more conventional fairy dusting of the reverb trail, Modulate builds in classy chorus in varying degrees.

Moving on, Sloverb has Boss's vintage Slow Gear pedal in its DNA. Here, your guitar and the reverb swells in. It's a really nice musical effect and is at best when the Parameter knob is set to zero. Advancing the knob adds in dry sound, so you start getting your note attack back. Interestingly, if you set the Effect Level to zero and the Parameter knob the same, you can have the swell effect without reverb.

Giving your delay pedal a break, the +Delay type combines delay and reverb,

If you're using both outputs, you can configure them to deliver left and right effects (with or without the dry sound mixed in) or to have effect from one output and dry sound from the other

This pedal is a doddle to use with easy hands-on tweaking and instantly accessible presets

and the Parameter knob turns up the level of delay, while the Time knob sets a delay time between 10ms and one second (there's no adjustment for delay feedback, but then the number of repeats programmed in here seems to work really well). Low down on the Time knob there's some metallic trash-can ambiences, but further up the dial you can balance the delay and reverb for some very practical combined sounds.

Of the final three settings, Lo-Fi is just plain nasty by design! It's not just lo-fi reverb that's added to normal guitar sound; an overall harsh distortion is applied as well, with the Parameter knob offering 10 different levels of distortion. The Gated reverb cuts the trail dead, rather than letting it decay, and you can set how long the burst of reverb lasts. Finally, Reverse does as you'd expect and has a high-cut filter to determine how sharp or dull it gets.

While the pedal's own footswitches offer useful performance capability, there's plenty more control to be had by adding an expression pedal or external footswitches, or by hooking up a MIDI controller to which many functions can be assigned. MIDI also offers the opportunity to chain multiple 200 Series pedals and select memories on all of them at once, making the RV-200 an ideal ambience companion to the DD-200 Digital Delay pedal.

Verdict

The RV-200 puts a large selection reverbs at your fingertips: plenty that you would use in everyday playing, some that you'd throw in as a wild card, and one or two that would maybe have you scratching your head and wondering how you'd use them. However, we'd say that most multi-effect pedals do exactly that, and you're not going to run out of options here.

Besides the wide range of sounds, however, this pedal simply screams practicality – it won't take up much space on your 'board and it's a doddle to use with easy hands-on tweaking and instantly accessible presets. Overall, a competitively priced way to add full reverb flexibility to your pedalboard!

BOSS RV-200

PRICE: £259
ORIGIN: Malaysia
TYPE: Reverb pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 127 user memories, selectable carryover, MIDI control
MODES: Room, Hall, Plate, Spring, Shimmer, Arpverb, Slowverb, Modulate, +Delay, Lo-fi, Gate, Reverse
CONTROLS: Mode selector, Time, Pre-Delay, Effect Level, Parameter, Low, High, Density button, Memory button, Bypass footswitch, Memory/Hold footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (A/Mono, B), standard outputs (A/Mono, B), standard CTL 1, 2/ EXP, MIDI IN, MIDI Out, USB
POWER: 3 x AA/LR6 batteries or 9V DC adaptor 260mA
DIMENSIONS: 101 (w) x 138 (d) x 65mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Decently sized unit for pedalboards; practical hands-on operation; useful range of reverbs; onboard presets

CONS The unit's inability to display the letter M, instead showing N, is quite amusing...

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« BLUEPRINT »

MAPLE MADE NEW

Martin's elegant new Inception acoustic hides some seriously innovative features that are designed to coax richer sounds from its maple and walnut body. We join Fred Greene to find out more

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Courtesy of Martin

Maple acoustic guitars have long occupied a respectable, if marginal, place in the world of guitar design. As a tonewood, maple is beautiful and abundant and, in fact, it has greater potential as a sustainable material than traditional tonewoods from the tropics. And yet, over the years, guitar designers have struggled to open up maple's voice and grant it attractive richness to complement its natural clarity. Now, however, Martin's design team think they have found a way to unlock the full potential of maple using deft and innovative design that allows it to reproduce a broad palette of sounds. The resulting guitar has been named the Inception. We join Fred Greene, the company's vice president of product management, to find out how the Inception is spearheading Martin's push to intelligently innovate rather than simply service its revered historic models.

Fred Greene explains how the company took a "completely different approach" with the Inception

How did the new Inception project first take shape?

"For a long time, we've had this discussion around our concerns about exotic hardwoods – the viability going forward, how much longer are we going to be able to get the mahoganies and the Guatemalan rosewoods, and so on, in any numbers going forward? Then, at some point, we understood that we're going to need to build more instruments – or at least create a path for building instruments – out of more sustainable hardwoods, stuff that maybe is sourced in the United States or Europe or places like that.

"We actually tried it before. We've made maple guitars before, and some are pretty good. We've made walnut guitars, and lots of different domestic hardwood guitars. But in the end, the consumers vote with their dollars and they just did not really embrace the products the way we'd hoped they would. They still just wanted a rosewood guitar; they just wanted a mahogany guitar. And that's what we're good at.

"So as we were having the conversation about maybe building another maple guitar, or trying to build another sustainable model, I said to the R&D team: 'I think we just need to take a completely different approach. I feel like we're trying to force this wood into a design or a body shape or a recipe that it wasn't originally designed to be a part of.' We started to have the conversation that, you know, Martin being an older company, most of our designs evolved around rosewood and mahogany. We were trying to create specific sounds or just trying to make the guitars be a certain way based upon the wood.

"But when you change a key component of that recipe – in this case the back and the sides – it would seem logical that you might want to change something else within that recipe. I keep using this analogy: everybody loves apple pie, but what if all of a sudden you decide to change the key ingredient, apple? You might say, 'I want to use a different kind of fruit – how about a tomato?' Well, that would require you to change more things in the recipe than just that one key component – you wouldn't continue with the same recipe, just simply substituting tomatoes for apples.

"So that was our thinking: let's go see if we can make maple sound a little more the way we want it to sound, as opposed to how it sounds in a recipe that it wasn't designed to be part of. I said, 'Let's try to rethink some things. Let's find out some construction techniques... maybe some concepts that other people have experimented with and see if we can put those to work for us.' For example, we aren't the first people to put holes in braces. [Southern Californian

PHOTO BY ERIC DOWD / COURTESY OF MARTIN

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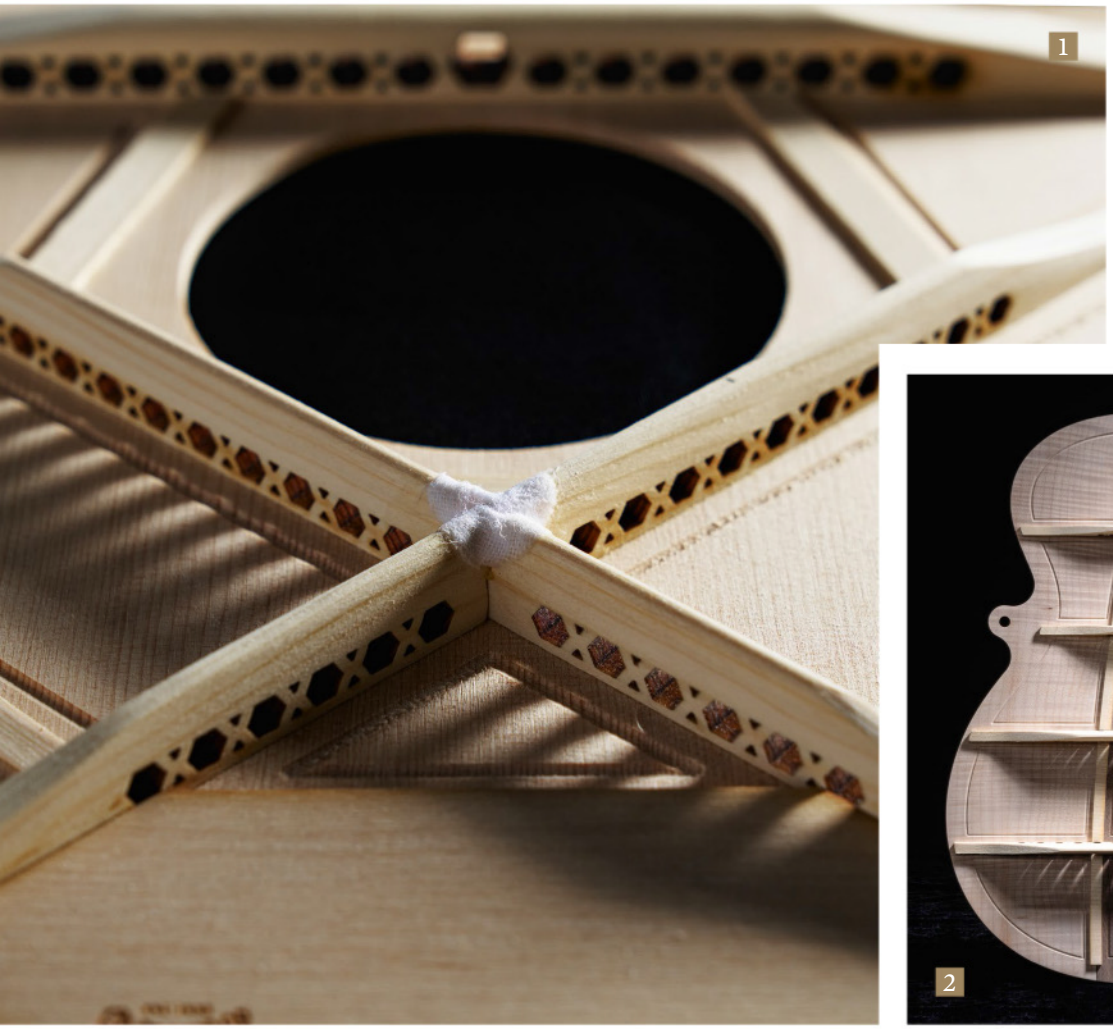


1. Honeycomb-section reinforcements for the bracing reduce mass but retain strength

2. The use of 'tone channels' granted extra resonance in key areas of the guitar's top and back

3. A classic X-shaped bracing patterm is still at the heart of the soundboard but tone channels and honeycomb braces are new

luthier] Kevin Ryan's done it and I know other small builders, who've done it... But we wanted to put our unique take on it and see if we can lighten up that top, make it be a little bit more responsive, make the maple have a little bit more overtones to it that we didn't feel like we're getting out of our current recipe. That was the thinking."

The Inception's bracing incorporates an interesting lattice of hollow, hexagonal-section reinforcements. Are these designed to retain strength while removing mass from the bracing?

"Yes – a honeycomb shape is a really strong shape and it was something we could do. We also wanted to make it look visually striking. I mean, part of this is the psychology of making guitars. If you're going to do something different – and it's kind of happening underneath the hood, so to speak, underneath the bonnet of the car – you've got to give the consumer some visual cues that this is going to be different from what they should be expecting.

"That's one reason we didn't make this using a dreadnought [as the body shape] because if I made this guitar as a dreadnought all people would say is, 'That's interesting. What would it sound like with rosewood?' And then I'm right back in the same boat all over again. So I wanted to use a non-traditional body shape for this series, our Grand Performance shape. I wanted to use the non-traditional bracing pattern and some other stuff to let people know it's not trying to be a dreadnought, it's not trying to be a 000. It's very much its own thing with its own voice."

It's interesting as it seems that the guitar designer's job touches on human psychology almost as much as it does pure lutherie and engineering.

"Correct, 100 per cent. We're not running a university where we're just doing experiments and then publishing papers afterwards, explaining to the world what we tried and whether it worked or it didn't work. I mean, in the end, it is a commercial business and we're trying to sell guitars. But the guitars do need to perform and they need to deliver something unique to the consumer so that they're willing to part with their hard-earned money in order to experience it.

"We understand that when people buy guitars, they don't buy just with their ears. We know that they buy with their eyes also, so they want to see something. And we know there's certain consumers out there who are traditionalists, and there are other consumers who are early adopters. I think lots of times guitar players think every guitar you come out with is aimed at them. That's not the case at all. Some guitars are aimed at different consumers – and it's possible this may not be the guitar for you if you're playing folk music or bluegrass music or something like that.... If you're buying a Porsche 911 it's not really aimed at the guy who's working construction at a job site; that person may want a truck. It's just a little bit different."

There are interesting narrow channels carved in the underside of the top of the Inception model. What are those intended to do?

"Yeah, the tone channels that we've cut into the instrument just allow the top to move a little bit more around the braces, to sort of vibrate – the top acts almost like an air pump. So the strings are the actuator and

"The tone channels that we've cut into the instrument allow the top to move a little bit more around the braces"

3

4. The non-traditional Grand Performance body shape gave Martin's R&D team freedom to innovate without sacrilege

5. The elegant, curved fillet of walnut in the back softens some of the response of the maple body

6. Up at the headstock, things are very classic – for all the new things it brings, Inception is a Martin in all the ways that matter

PHOTOS BY ERIC DOWD / COURTESY OF MARTIN

then the top vibrates up and down. All we wanted to do was to free the top up a little bit more. We had considered making the top thinner in general. Because most of our tops right now are finished at 120 thousandths of an inch thickness, and you can take them down to about 105 and probably be okay, for the most part. The problem is when you start getting really thin like that, you start to lose some of the structural integrity of the instrument. Also, the instrument can start to lose headroom, you know; the top gets a little too flabby.

"So we wanted to find a way to let the top move a little bit more but not lose too much of that structural integrity and mass. I wanted it to be able to still have the headroom if you banged on the guitar pretty hard. So these channels cut around the braces allowed it to move. We have lighter braces in there, but we tested all the braces and they're just as strong with the holes in them as they are without the holes. We thought it was a nice elegant, interesting way to attack the problem of allowing the top to move a little bit.

"I think it's cool, I think it's fun – and it does change the sound. We've done some nodal testing on the computer where you can see that the top does vibrate differently with the braces and the sonic channels compared with a stock model without those elements. It is a different sound, for sure."

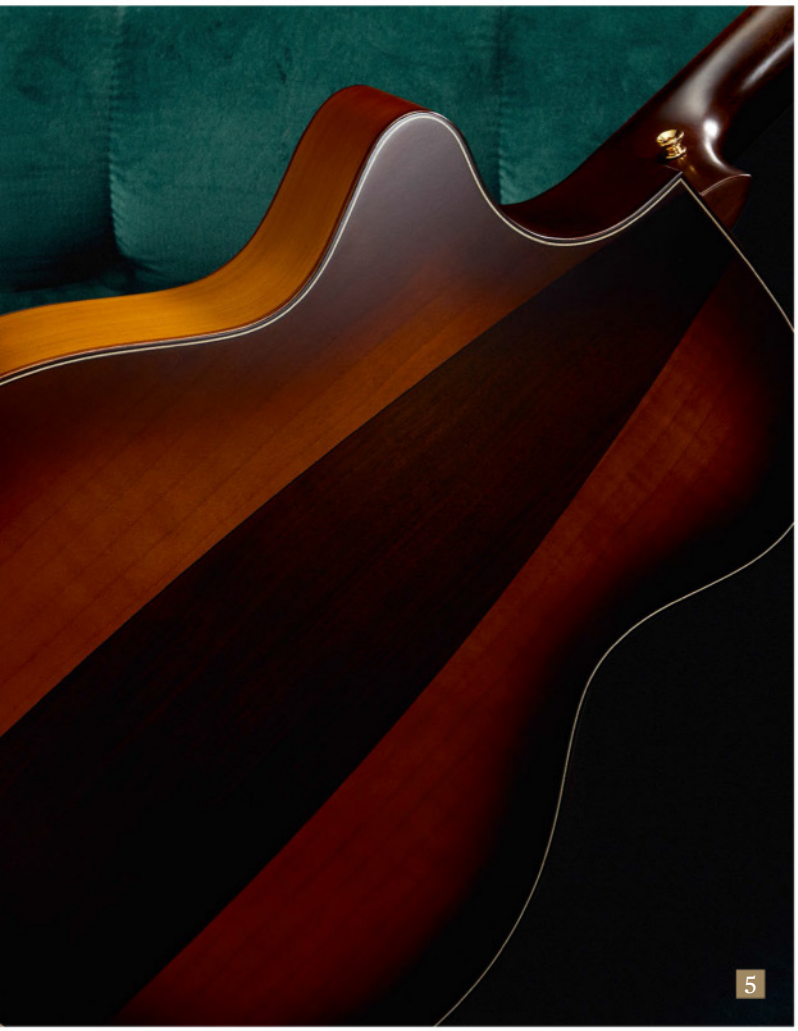
What is it about maple that you felt necessitated a fresh approach with this project, design-wise?

"I know some people really like the sound of maple and I think it works on some guitars. I think it works in some recipes, but it didn't necessarily work the way we wanted it to work in all of our Martin recipes. Gibson has been making maple guitars obviously forever with its J-200s. But our issue with maple is it can sound a bit stiff: you get a strong, quick fundamental note off of maple and then it sort of sounds a little compressed and decays quickly, and you just don't get a lot of nuanced overtones over the top of that. Some people like that sound and that fits the way they play or what they're trying to achieve. It actually records pretty well because of that.

"But we wanted to try to create something that, as a sound, was a little more sophisticated. As a tonewood, there was a lot going on with maple that we really liked, but we felt like it just needed a little bit more help. We were probably hurting it with the way we were building tops and some other elements on the instrument. So we added in that little bit of walnut in the back, with the wedge, to help soften up some of that tone and give it a little bit more sweetness in there because walnut is sort of in between a rosewood and a mahogany in the way it sounds. Then, of course, letting the top move a little bit more, so the notes didn't decay quite as quickly. We felt like that was a good compromise to make it a little bit more sophisticated in sound. Then you add in a walnut bridge and a walnut fingerboard and a walnut neck... it all starts to work together to sweeten up that tone."

We love the curved shape of the inset walnut panel on the back of the guitar. Was that purely an aesthetic choice?

"Actually, there was a purpose to it. We thought about just going with a standard D-35 style wedge in the back. But we wanted to get the most out of that piece of walnut; we didn't want to waste any of the wood. Obviously, it's a sustainable model,



so what you'll see is that the actual widest point of the wedge in the back is directly underneath the bridge. We were trying to capture some of the sonic tone that comes off the bridge; we know that a lot of the tone that comes from the guitar is right there behind the bridge on the top.

"We tried to reflect some of that walnut – we wanted to maximise the tone we were getting out of that – so we thought it was once again a good, interesting and visual cue to the consumer that this was something a little bit different and non-traditional. But there was an actual engineering reason why we did it."

Did the success of the SC series of acoustics, with their innovative neck joint and offset body, allow you to dream a bit bigger when it came to further innovation?

"Absolutely. I mean, we're not going to walk away from dreadnoughts and 000s and 00s and the traditional things we do. That's who we are. Ultimately, we know we do those things really well and we're going to continue to do those things, going forward. However, we're not going to allow people to box us in and say, 'This is all you can do.' Martin has always been an innovative company. We've been lucky, fortunate, blessed to have created some really iconic models and shapes and bracing patterns and all of those things – and we've certainly enjoyed the success of that. But we want to continue to provide artists and players the opportunity to try new things. We think we're uniquely positioned to provide that to people. We're not going to leave that up to everyone else and hope they come up with a good idea. We feel like we have good ideas and things we want to try.

> "What you're seeing from Inception is just the first shot of what we're going to do with some of these domestic hardwoods"

"The SC was sort of a shot over the bow to everyone to say, 'Hey, we could do really innovative, interesting concepts and guitars going forward.' And we're going to continue to build on those. I think what you're seeing from Inception right now, it's just the first shot of what we're going to do with some of these domestic hardwoods. We are already working on the second version, which is very different from the first version: it will utilise some of the same concepts but in a different way. Once again, if you're going to change key ingredients in your dish, you need to start changing the recipe in general. So if we're going to use a different wood, we're going to make some other changes, we're not going to say it's a one-size-fits-all. In other words, we're not going to make X-brace dreadnoughts and then just stick in every kind of wood in the world and go, 'Hey, what do you think of this?' I think that's a little lazy from a design standpoint.

"I think when companies have success, or they have iconic models, we can tend to get lazy, just try to milk people with the same old thing. But I think the consumers and the artists deserve better than that. I think they need to feel like we're working hard to provide them with new sonic possibilities. And we shouldn't leave that up to just the digital world to do that for them." G

www.martinguitar.com

Longtermers

A few months' gigging, recording and everything that goes with it – welcome to *Guitarist*'s longterm test report

With its first live rehearsal under its belt, it's time for the ProShop build to hit the stage

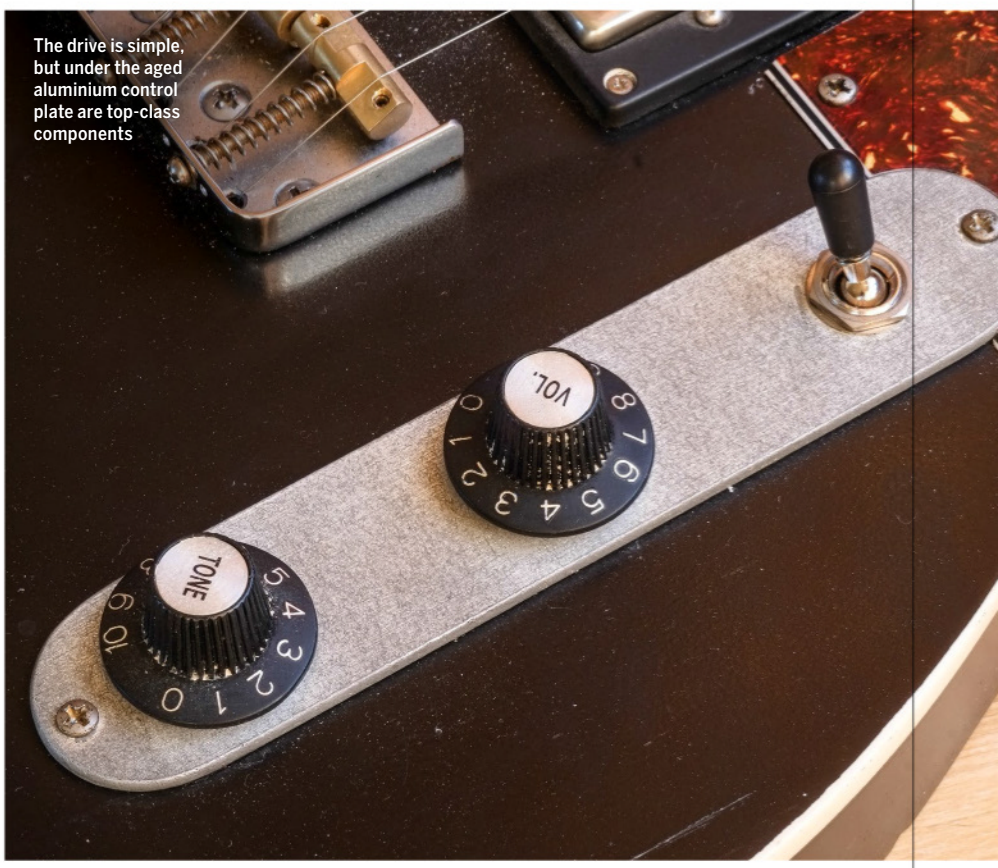
Vintage ProShop V72 Custom Build

With Dave Burrluck

Writer

DAVE BURRLUCK
Guitarist Gear Reviews Editor

Last issue we saw Dave's review of the custom-ordered electric from Vintage's ProShop. But over a Longtermers test, will this lightly reliced T-style satisfy our reviews editor's needs?



The drive is simple, but under the aged aluminium control plate are top-class components

As I stepped into our cramped rehearsal room, I was expecting the worst. There'd surely be cries of, "What's *that* guitar?" and, "Oh, it's one of those cheapo Vintage copies. Shouldn't you be playing a Fender like me?" But either my bandmates have become more polite since we last got together for a pre-gig rehearsal, or they actually thought this custom-designed Vintage 'DB' didn't look too shabby.

Some might say that it does look a bit shabby, of course, thanks to its pretty lightly reliced finish and aged hardware. But, by design, it's not OTT and its T-style outline is obviously easy on the eye. As we reminded ourselves of tunes we'd played many times before, I was getting used to my new squeeze, even though it doesn't feel like a new guitar at all thanks in part to those well-tempered smooth edges.

> "Ordering up a custom instrument can be a risk, but this one passed the rehearsal room test"

To recap, last year John Hornby Skewes, the UK company behind the long-running Vintage guitar brand, asked if we'd like to shine a bit of light on the new custom-build service within its ProShop. We detailed the custom build in our last issue, which is effectively a complete reworking of its standard semi-solid T-style V72. Impressed with the boutique-like makeover, I thought I'd give it a try out in the real world.

I'm forever bringing new, on-review guitars to rehearsals and gigs, and many last just a couple of numbers before I revert to my usual axe. Part of that, of course, is that they need to be returned in the same state as we received them. Gone, seemingly, are the days of companies having review samples that oiks like us could use and abuse. Relics were a boon to us reviewers as we no longer needed to worry about marking the dipped in glass-like finish. But, even so, the escalating cost of premium-brand relics mean most of us would think twice about leaving one of those on a stand unattended at a gig while we nip off for a toilet break and pint at half-time.

But none of this appearance or feel matters if it doesn't sound right for the band you're making music with. This particular combo specialises in cross-genre tunes: one minute we're comping on a jazz/blues standard, next is a mod classic, then there's a bit of Latin, which ends up requiring some Santana-like flourishes, before we hit a couple of early Elvis Costello tunes and need a sit down. Now, even if we could, we're not aiming to precisely replicate the original studio recordings of any of those songs, so for the most part it's about getting ballpark sounds. Personally, too, I use a very simple rig: guitar, small pedalboard, amp. Level or solo boosts come from the guitar's volume control, unless things get really noisy when I'll kick in a boost pedal to lift a solo above the cacophony.

In theory, plenty of guitars can cover that sort of ground, but for my purpose I've just found this formula does the job: classic PAF-y bridge humbucker (with or without coil-split), not overhot neck P-90, a fast drive preferably from a toggle-switch pickup selector, and – very importantly to me – well-tuned volume and tone controls. I'm not chasing any plaudits for originality, but it still surprises me that on so many new guitars the control circuits (or indeed the pickups) don't factor in this really quite basic gig-aimed usability. With the Wilkinson R Series pickups and the electrics I'd requested implemented by the ProShop team, the 'DB' doesn't let the side down. And even if the person steering the ship is a little rusty, I'm getting the sounds I need. For once, too, my bandmates agree. Three hours later, it's the only guitar I've taken out of its gigbag.

But the added value here is that this blend is equally as valid for the at-home practising player. Up to now, the 'DB' has been doing such great service as my go-to house guitar that it needed a bit of dusting. Its light weight is ideal for some sofa noodling, or the more studious process of learning new songs and getting them under your fingers, with just enough acoustic volume to play along with your hi-fi at conversation levels. Not all guitars I've owned – or borrowed – suit both this live and domestic use.

It's the beauty of this rather affordable custom design route that the Vintage ProShop offers. I 'designed' a guitar to suit my purposes, not a guitar intended to sell thousands across the world. Outside of the ProShop, Vintage lists a dizzying array of guitars, but not one has this particular specification. Ordering up a custom instrument can be a shot in the dark, a big risk, but on this occasion I got exactly what I asked for. It passed the rehearsal room test, the next stop might involve an audience...

Reviewed *508* ***Price*** *£1,299 (inc gigbag)* ***On Test Since*** *November 2023* ***Studio Session*** *Practice only* ***Gigged*** *One rehearsal...* ***vintageguitarsrus.com***

CONNOR SELBY

The young blues maestro recounts a great deal on a vintage Gibson ES-125 and an aversion to Firebirds

This Gibson ES-125 was a fortuitous Gumtree find that has since joined Connor on tours with Beth Hart and Robert Cray

PHOTO BY ROB BLACKHAM

What was the first serious guitar that you bought with your own money?

"When I was about 15 or 16 I did my work experience at Peach Guitars, when it was in Braintree [Essex]. In those days it was a small independent shop, before it became the huge thing that it is now. For the whole week I was just trying as many guitars as I could. My granddad had passed away many years before and had left me some money and, because I was doing my work experience, John Priest, who owns Peach Guitars, gave me a really good deal on a nice secondhand Custom Shop Strat.

"I'd been playing for a few years at that point and I was really into music. I think I was just starting to play live shows and stuff and, weirdly, during that week they really got me into Stevie Ray Vaughan because they had his music playing all the time in the shop. So for about six months after that I just really spent a lot of time trying to nail his style. Prior to that I was listening to the same people I listen to now – Eric Clapton and BB King."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"The last guitar I bought was a Gibson Custom Shop SG. It's kind of a funny story, really, because I had an SG prior to that, but I sold it to a friend and I didn't really intend to buy another one. The reason I sold it in the first place is because I wanted to get another Les Paul or something like that. But I ended up seeing this relatively recent '61 SG Reissue with the old-school trem and I just fell in love with it. So I bought it impulsively.

"Les Pauls are my favourite guitars, but I thought that if I was going to buy another guitar to use as a backup, then I wanted it to be slightly different. I wanted it to be similar enough that I can still get the same sort of sounds, but I don't just want to have another guitar that's the same, you know? The SG is a nice sort of middle ground."

What is the most incredible find or bargain you've had when buying gear?

"About two years ago I was on Gumtree and I found a Gibson ES-125 really cheap. I'd wanted one for many years at that point and I was lucky enough to find this one that was in really great condition. So I ended up going to Gloucester to get it and it was an old guy who'd had it for, like, 25 years or so and I think he had some injury to his hand so he couldn't play any more. I fell in love with that guitar and I've used it so much ever since. I've used it on some of the support tours that I've done with people like Beth Hart and Robert Cray. It is such an amazing-sounding guitar."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've experienced?

"I went through a phase where I was really into Cream-era Eric Clapton and I bought a Joe Bonamassa Epiphone Firebird I. I mean, it was a really nice guitar, but I just found it really uncomfortable to play, basically. I wouldn't say I necessarily completely regretted it, but that's probably the only guitar I've ever bought where I've not been able to use it because it was just so uncomfortable, at least for me, just because of the weird shape of the Firebird. I used it probably two or three times on stage. And then I just thought, 'This is not really for me.'"

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"I mentioned before that I had an SG that I sold before buying the other one and that was a really nice guitar. I suppose in a way I kind of regret selling that, but I sold it to a good friend so I can still go and see it if I want to!"

CONNOR'S GO-TO RIG

"My rig is quite basic. I've got a Custom Shop Gibson Les Paul R9 with ThroBak PAFs in it; that's my main guitar and my '61 Reissue SG is a backup. I've blocked the trem system on the SG, just for tuning stability and because I never use it anyway so there's no point. I just kind of like the look of it, to be honest. And my pedalboard is very basic as well. Lately, I've been using a Klon copy and also I've got a Strymon Flint tremolo/reverb pedal. Then I use a Lazy J 20 as my amp. That's basically the whole rig."

Connor's Gibson Custom Shop R9 Les Paul is his go-to stage guitar, while an SG waits in the wings as a backup

PHOTO BY GRAHAM HUTTON PHOTOGRAPHY

"I've always favoured humbuckers, they're what my heroes used – Clapton, BB King and Paul Kossoff"

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"I think don't be too impulsive. We've all done it, we've all gone into a shop, played a guitar, fallen in love with it and just, you know, 'Gotta have it!' It's great when that happens, but oftentimes, at least for me, when you go into these shops, it can be quite overwhelming. So just don't be too impulsive about it. Make sure that you go back a few times and try it and take your time."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online and what were you looking at?

"I'm always on eBay and Reverb, just looking for deals. Don't ever buy anything, really. Well, occasionally, like with my ES-125. I'm often in London, so I'm always going to Denmark Street window shopping. I just love looking at old guitars, I think they're beautiful objects. I always love going into shops and looking at all the details and seeing them in person. It's a whole different thing to actually see them in person and maybe sometimes play them."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp, or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"I think, for me, the guitar is the more important thing. I think you can get a good sound out of more or less any amp, if you know what you're doing. I'm lucky in that my tone is very direct and I don't rely on a lot of effects and things, so I can pretty much just use any amp on the clean setting, turn it up a bit, get a tiny bit of drive from doing that – and that's more or less all I need. But if I have a guitar that is cheap and it doesn't play nicely, if it doesn't respond in the way I want it to, then I'm going to struggle a lot with that."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

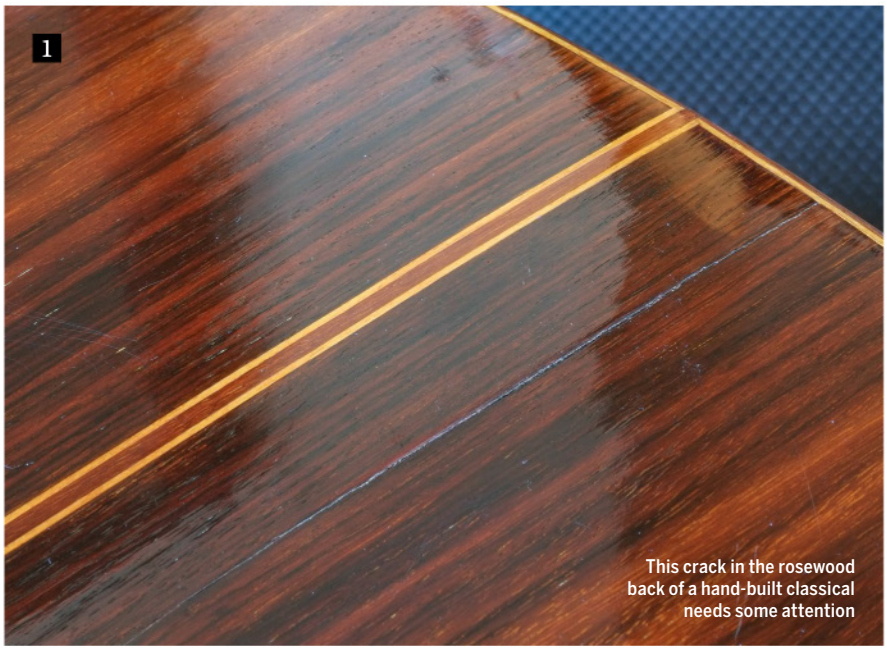
"Definitely humbuckers. I've always favoured humbuckers I guess, primarily because they're what my heroes used – people like Clapton and BB King and Paul Kossoff, all those guys. But also I think they just suit my playing style and it suits my voice on the guitar more than single coils. I mean, I love them as well, but if I had to choose one, it would definitely be humbuckers." **[DM]**

Connor Selby's eponymous debut album is available now via Provogue/Mascot Label Group. Connor will tour the UK in March and April
www.connorselby.com

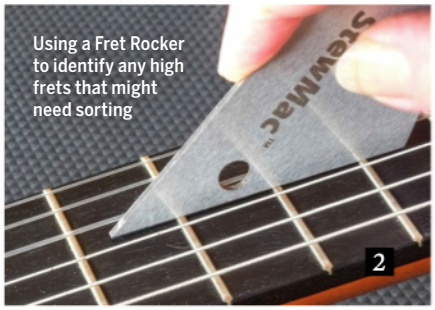
The MOD SQUAD

NYLON CALLING

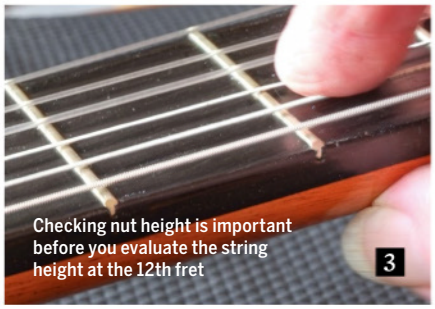
Ever attempted to clean up and get a nylon-string playing to its full potential? Dave Burrluck shares some tips



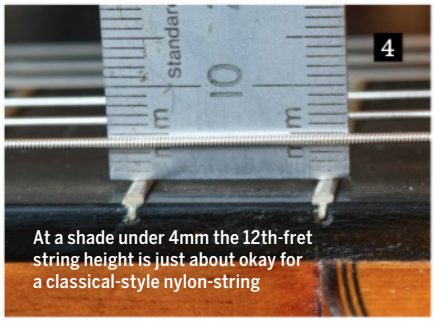
This crack in the rosewood back of a hand-built classical needs some attention



Using a Fret Rocker to identify any high frets that might need sorting



Checking nut height is important before you evaluate the string height at the 12th fret



At a shade under 4mm the 12th-fret string height is just about okay for a classical-style nylon-string

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Like many players of a certain age, my first guitar was a nylon-string. I don't think it had a brand name, but it was definitely a cheapo. I'd caught the rock 'n' roll bug much earlier, which meant the poor ol' nylon string was soon put in the back of a wardrobe while I shredded my fingers on a lowly Gibson copy of equally dubious origin. Some decades later I re-caught the nylon bug and discovered a whole new world. Any of us can use a nylon-string. You might want to dip into the classical/flamenco world, or jazzier bossa nova styles, but, yes, every house should have one.

Some time back I'd loaned a Córdoba GK Pro to a friend who fancied trying some nylon flavour for a recording. On receiving it back some months later with an "Oh, sorry I should have changed the strings..." I was met with a rather neglected guitar. It made me wonder how many other neglected instruments are out there, unused, missing a string or two and in dire need of some TLC? The thing is, with a bit of spit 'n' polish you might have a 'gateway' guitar on your hands – some nylon style that could take you somewhere different.

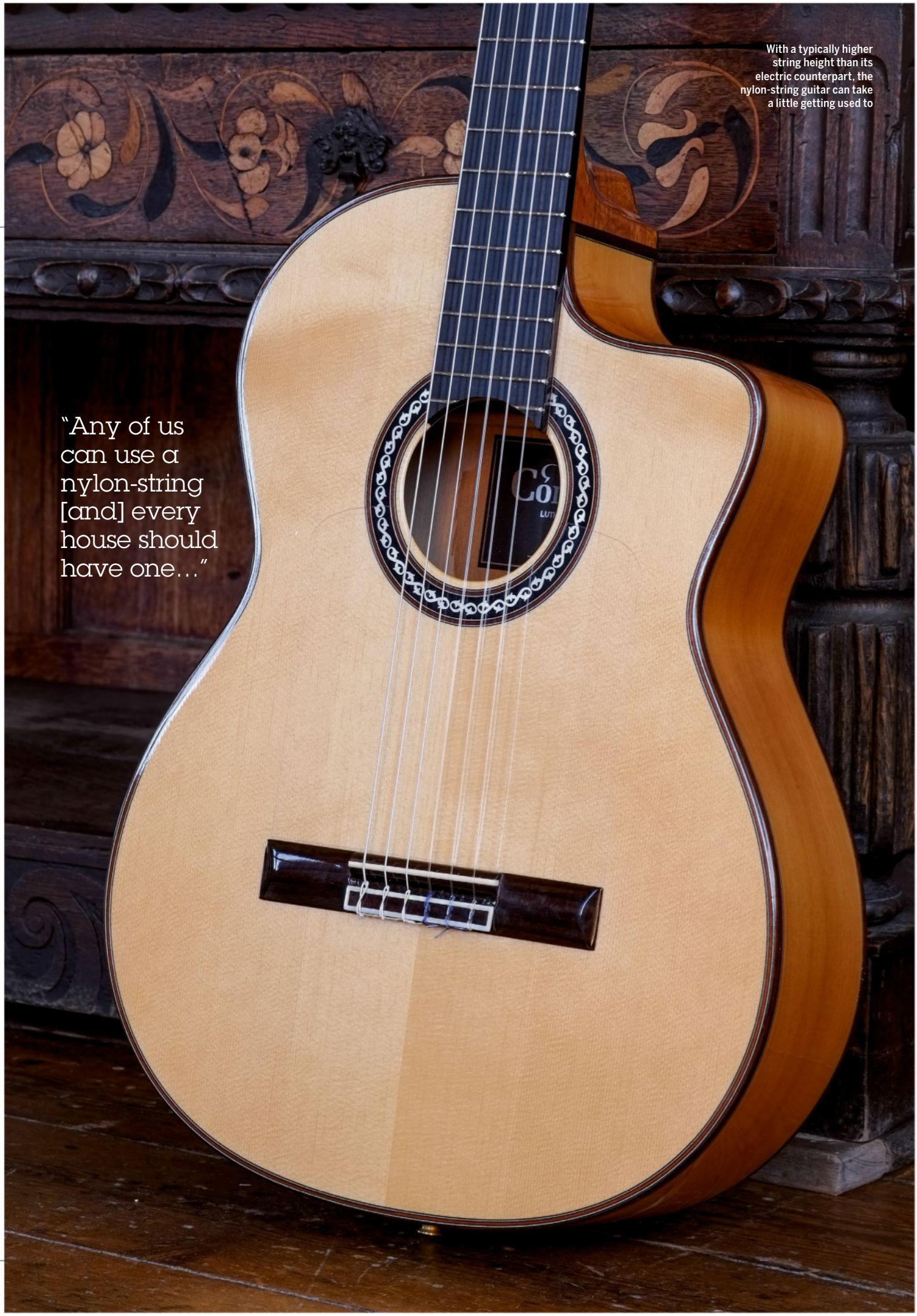
Fit For Purpose?

Getting any guitar that's been slightly forgotten about back into its best playing condition starts with a thorough evaluation – exactly the same as you might do if you're considering buying a used guitar. Are there any obvious alarm bells going off, like a bridge that might have slightly come away from the top or any obvious cracks in the top, back or sides [pic 1]? If it sort of looks okay and has strings, even if they're old, tune it up and give it a basic play test.

As we're focusing on nylon-string 'classical' guitars here, it's doubtful they'll be any (or very little) fretwear, but you should still check how straight the neck is. Simply hold down the G string at the 1st fret and, in this instance, the 12th fret and in the middle of the fingerboard you should see a slight gap – certainly no bigger than half the diameter of the top E string – between the underside of the string and the top of the fret.

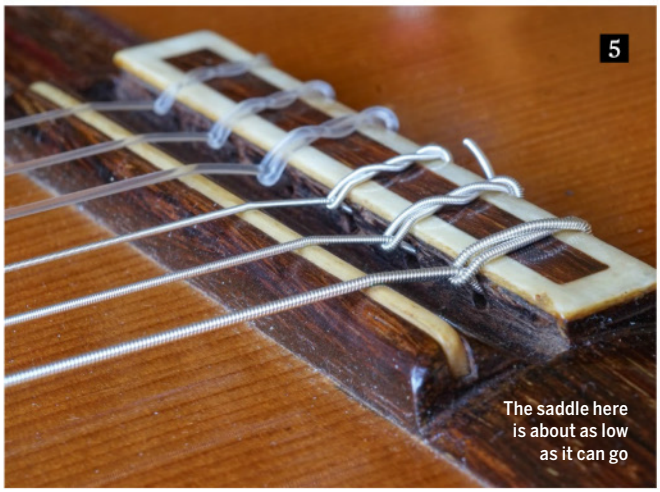
Traditionally, the classical guitar doesn't have a truss rod, but many of the more modern builds do, including 'crossover' nylon-strings. If you're in the former camp, then a forward-humped neck will require some specialist help, but with the latter, relaxing the truss rod may well fix the problem. Obviously, if the neck has a concave bow, a slight tightening of the truss rod should get it straight with barely any relief – that's what we're aiming for. As ever, play each string at every accessible fret to check whether there are any false notes or buzzes that might be caused by a fret that's come unseated. If you really want to go to town, check the fingerboard with a Fret Rocker [pic 2].

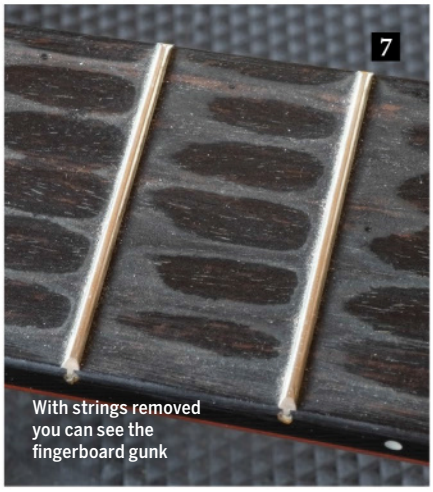
If you're new to the nylon-string guitar, you'll probably be getting used to a wider fingerboard and string spacing. You might also be a little concerned about the string height, which should be much higher than a steel-string, not least your electric. So, while we're still evaluating, check the nut height first: fret each string at the 3rd fret and visually check there's just a slight gap above the 1st fret [pic 3]. If that's looking okay, then measure the string height in the usual fashion at the 12th fret between the top of the fret and the underside of the string. Traditionally, a concert classical will have a higher string height, a flamenco guitar lower, but a good starting point would be no higher than 3mm on the high E and 4mm on the bass side [pic 4]. If you think the nut grooves look too high, simply capo at the 1st fret and measure at the 13th fret. At this stage, you need to see if you're in the right ballpark.

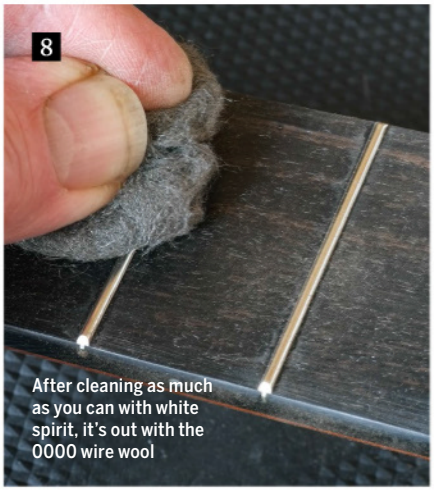


With a typically higher string height than its electric counterpart, the nylon-string guitar can take a little getting used to

"Any of us can use a nylon-string [and] every house should have one…"







PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

As with any glued-in neck acoustic guitar, the problem you have is the limited adjustment potential. So long as the neck is virtually straight and the nut is okay, if your 12th/13th fret height is too high you need to see if there's enough saddle height above the top face of the bridge to reduce it. If, for example, over time the top has bellied up, the saddle might have already been reduced and you'll either have to live with what you have or seek some professional advice [pic 5]. Likewise, if the neck has a slightly forward angle and in combination with too much relief (bow, which can't be straightened), you're in trouble unless you have a truss rod.

One thing to consider on a classical-style nylon-string is that most (certainly lower-cost) guitars usually have a straight topped saddle that's not domed or curved. Some makers, however, like a little radius. "I also curve the saddle a bit," says US luthier Kenny Hill, "with the arc peaking on the fourth string. The purpose is *not* to accommodate a curved fingerboard (it's not usually curved) but to accommodate the different motion of the strings themselves.

"It's doubtful your cheapo will have a bone nut. Is that important? Well, it's not going to harm"

"The third and fourth strings move more wildly and have more tendency to buzz," he continues. "By setting them higher, the better-behaved fifth and sixth strings can be kept at a more comfortable height." [Pic 6]

With a standard classic bridge, the saddle sits in an open-ended slot and shouldn't be glued-in. This means, because of the lower string tension, you can slightly detune then take a piece of dowel – or a block of wood with a radiused edge – that's slightly thicker/higher than the strings' height and push it under the strings right in front of the bridge; with some pliers, pull out the saddle from the bass side. You can then make your adjustments and push it back in. (However, note that you shouldn't do this if you have an under-saddle piezo – here you will need to slacken the strings much more and pull the saddle out from the top.) With a closed-end modern bridge that's not possible and you'll have to slacken off the strings. Again, basic setups like this won't cost a lot from a good pro.

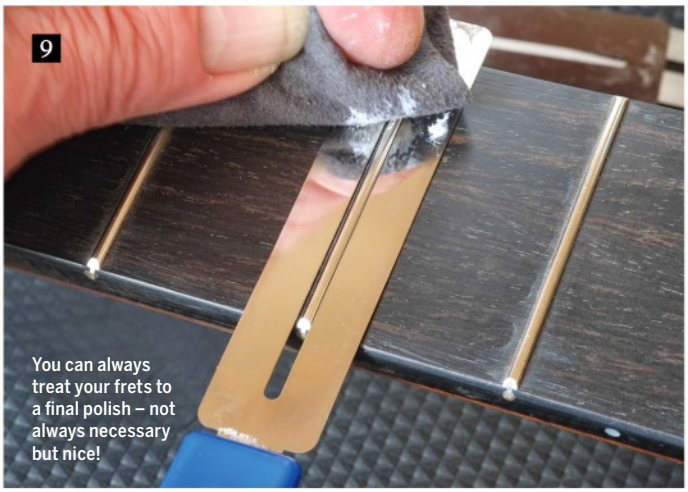
It's doubtful your cheapo will have a bone nut or saddle. Is that important? Well, it's not going to harm anything and would be a sensible upgrade, but only if the neck/string height geometry is looking okay. If you've been making notes on any problems you've encountered – which I suggest you do – you can make a plan for any DIY fixes or at least pass on your concerns to a pro.

Clean Your Machine

So, strings off and wipe over the guitar with a very lightly damp cloth to remove any dust and gunk. Guitars with older strings might well have a French polish finish, which should clean up perfectly ready for a very light wax polish later; use that lightly damp cloth, then a dry one, with plenty of elbow grease. More likely your guitar will have a 'plastic' coating so there's no need to worry. Gunky-looking fingerboards [pic 7] can easily be cleaned up with a little white spirit on a piece of kitchen towel and a vigorous rub. Any more stubborn gunk can usually be removed using an old credit card as a 'knife', then a re-rub with white spirit.

We've covered levelling, recrowning and polishing up frets many times in The Mod Squad, but because you don't bend strings across the 'board like you would with a steel-string, I've often experienced new nylon-string guitars that have quite scratchy fret tops. There's no need for that: a quick rub with 600-grit wet and dry on a flat wooden or hard cork block, moving side to side across the frets, will cure it. If it doesn't, then you'll need to very lightly level the fret tops; I use a fine oil-stone. That will mean you'll need to recrown the frets before the polishing stages.

Also check for any fret sprout if the guitar has been in a dry environment: you can easily rub those back with a fine flat file, or a small sharpening block, which is what I use.



You can always treat your frets to a final polish – not always necessary but nice!

After the fingerboard and fretwork is done, a little dab of fingerboard oil finishes the job

A minuscule drop of oil on the tuning machine gears

Finding the right strings (that suit you) might take some experimentation

Then 0000 steel wool [pic 8] will shine things up – or you can use a metal polish, but it's a little unnecessary [pic 9]. If you have electronics in the guitar, tape up the soundhole and preamp control panel or use a similar-grade abrasive pad. A final dab of light fingerboard oil should finish the job [pic 10].

Speaking of a light drop of oil, apply a tiny amount to the open cog wheel of the tuners [pic 11] and rotate them quickly wiping off any residue. And tighten (but don't over-tighten) any potentially loose screws on the tuners, too.

Strings, Strings & More Strings

Like steel-strings, there are loads of different types and brands of strings for your nylon guitar [pic 12]. Gauge is less of an issue here, it's more about tension – high or hard, medium or normal, and low – and/or the wrap on the wound strings. Swapping from high to lower tension strings can also help with a guitar that has an over-high action. All in, it's really quite a rabbit hole to fall into.

Early in my experiments I settled on Savarez's High Tension 520J set, quite a classic set I was led to believe and one that really suited my first proper classical guitar (even though I was more of a Latin/jazz fudger). These are quite crisp sounding with a fast response – some way from the clichéd 'mellow' nylon-string sound. They're not cheap, either. For more general use, especially with stage-aimed nylon electros, I've found Savarez's Cristal Corum High Tension 500CJ set really good, too.

Bear in mind that different brands and types will sound different, which could be quite a major consideration if you're playing acoustically and/or recording. Plenty of players will mix the wound basses from one brand with the treble strings from another. Like I said, it's a very different world.

One thing to consider, particularly if you're amplified or recording, is the string noise, which is part of the sound for some and just plain annoying for others. LaBella's Professional 413P Studio strings use polished golden alloy (80/20 brass) for the wound string wraps, which really helps to remove that 'squeak' – again, not cheap, but they do last for ages.

Another recommendation for everyday use is made closer to home: Rotosound's Superia Pro CL3, which is high tension and less expensive. As you'll find, nylon-strings seem to take ages before they settle to pitch, even with stretching. I have no scientific proof for this, but I find that these Rotosounds seem to settle faster than others, which can be quite handy if you need to restring on gig day (which is, frankly, not recommended). Of course, you'll have to get used to that tie-block bridge, but there are loads of YouTube clips on that subject. Practice makes perfect.

Final Thoughts

I've often referred to the world of the classical and nylon-string guitar as a parallel universe with its own history, makers and players – old and new. Yes, brands like Yamaha, Córdoba and Godin (to name but three) have brought the instrument into the rock 'n' roll retail world with considerable success, and the 'crossover' guitar is an obvious place to start, with its aim for the nylon-string sound and more steel-string like playability. And while, with a little care and attention, you might be able to repurpose that old cheapo, I'd strongly suggest looking at something a little more modern and get practising and listening. Don't blame me if you get hooked!

Huw Price's **Nitty Gritty**

Among the earliest guitar effects, wah has remained a pedalboard staple for decades

Wah Pedals

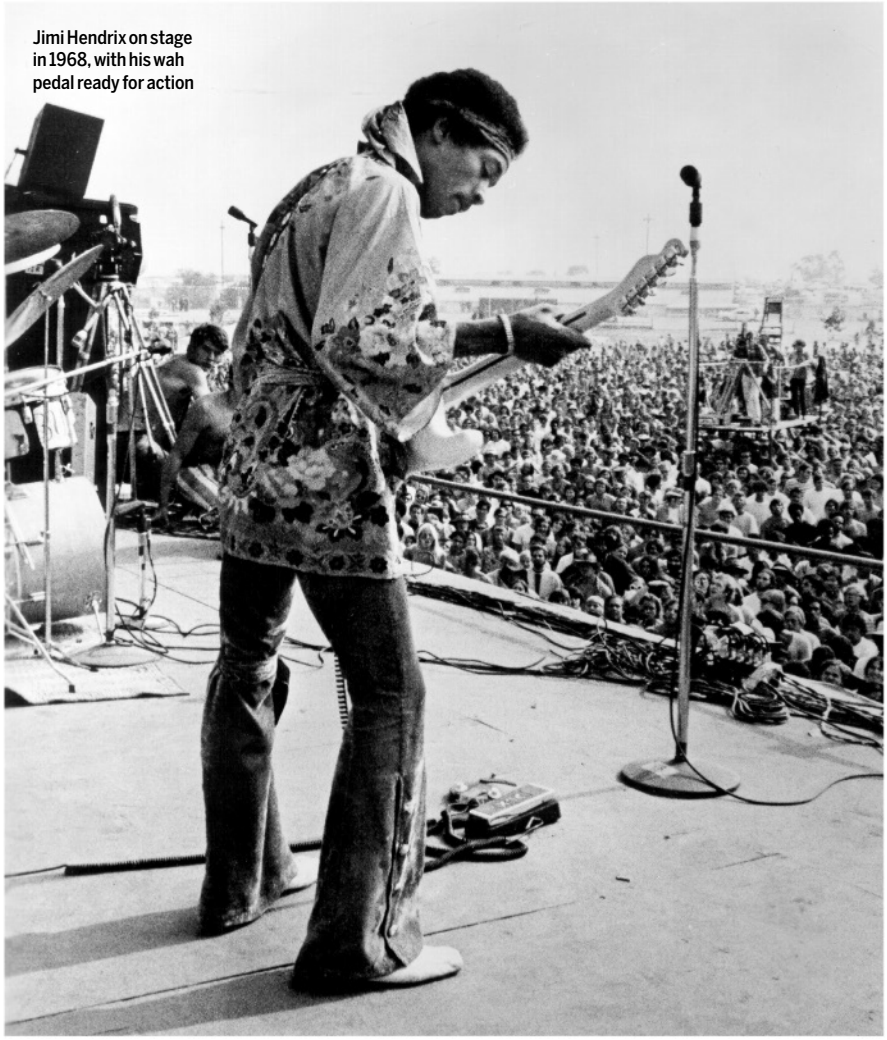
In late October 1965, Vox designer Dick Denney visited the Thomas Organ Company, who distributed Vox in the US, to advise on the design of a new line of US manufactured solid-state amplifiers. One of these amps was the 100-watt Vox Super Beatle, which featured a resonant boost.

In a company summary of their work with Denny, it was proposed that a top-panel selector switch could be used to toggle between "the normal maximum treble boost action and the selected resonant boost characteristic". It was also observed that "an interesting wah-wah effect is obtained by operating the boost switch between its two positions. A remote control for this at the guitar would be novel, however, the cost and complication would probably be high."

Thomas Organ Company engineer Brad Plunkett did some further design work, replacing the frequency selector switch with a potentiometer and using an Armstrong oscillator circuit that was suggested by his colleague Les Kushner. Plunkett tried it out with a guitar-playing friend called John Glenum and, although they loved the effect, they quickly realised hand operation would be impractical.

And here's where accounts differ – because both Plunkett and Vox endorser and session guitarist Del Casher claim to have thought of using a Vox organ volume pedal instead of a hand-operated control knob. Casher recalled Thomas Organ president Joe Benaron coming by for a listen and declaring this pedal-operated wah effect unsuitable for electric guitar. However, he was convinced that it could be successfully marketed to electric trumpet players. To be fair, Stan Cutler's original resonant boost circuit had been designed to simulate the Harmon mute trumpet sound made popular by Clyde McCoy.

Clyde McCoy was duly paid $500 to endorse a pedal he probably never used. The first wahs appeared in August 1967 and featured a picture of McCoy on the baseplate. Later versions only carried a facsimile of McCoy's signature, but both versions are now highly sought after. It's a reasonable assumption that the overwhelming majority of those who are seeking them out are guitarists, rather than trumpet players.



Jimi Hendrix on stage in 1968, with his wah pedal ready for action

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

> Stan Cutler's original resonant boost circuit had been designed to simulate the Harmon mute trumpet sound [of] Clyde McCoy

With the likes of Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix picking up on the wah-wah, it didn't take long for Vox to switch its marketing efforts towards guitar players and the pedal was renamed the Vox V846. For a glorious flavour of the era, search out the Vox Wah-Wah commercial featuring The Electric Prunes.

Between early 1967 and early 1968, Vox manufactured wahs with a grey enclosure in the UK; the first Cry Baby wahs starting appearing in 1967. Thomas Organ and Vox wahs were briefly manufactured in Italy by Electtronica Musicale Europea (EME) before Jen Elettronica began Cry Baby production in 1969. Brad Plunkett and Les Kushner filed a patent application on 24 February 1967 and the patent, number 3,530,224, was granted on 22 September 1970.

How It Works

In essence, a wah pedal is a bandpass filter, which simultaneously rolls off the upper and lower frequency ranges and restricts the audio flowing through the pedal to a narrower band of midrange frequencies.

Vox refers to its V846-HW, which is modelled on the original 60s V846, as "a perfect combination of Vox's world-famous technology, with classical yet modern specifications". Its clear base reveals the components that bring the effect to life

There is a boost (resonance peak) at the point where the upper frequencies start to roll off. This can also be called the low-pass filter frequency point. When the pedal is operated it moves the resonance peak frequency up and down.

Recording studio equalisers, such as the Pultec EQP-1A, allowed engineers to choose specific frequencies for boosting or cutting. This was achieved by combining carefully selected inductor and capacitor values in various switch positions. The premise behind the wah pedal was that it should be controlled by a variable resistor, rather than a switch. Like a simplified studio equaliser, the wah circuit contains an inductor and an accompanying 4.7µF capacitor, but both are fixed in value. The innovative feature of the wah circuit is that the pedal alters the current flowing through the 4.7µF capacitor, which makes it appear like a variable capacitor.

The intensity of the wah is partly determined by the 'Q' – which is the range of frequencies around the peak – and a narrower 'Q' accentuates the effect. In wah pedals the 'Q' is preset by a 33k resistor, but it can be altered to achieve different tones.

For a more detailed analysis of the wah circuit, check out RG Keen's *The Technology Of Wah Pedals*. It has been the go-to online reference for wah builders and modders since it was published in 1999.

Super Inductor

In the wah world, there are plenty of opinions about what constitutes the best set of features. Transistor types, tropical fish capacitors and potentiometer tapers are hotly debated – but most attention is paid to the various inductor types. Some have achieved mythical status and a non-original inductor in a vintage wah will seriously dent its value.

In the wah world, transistor types, tropical fish capacitors and potentiometer tapers are hotly debated

The inductor that featured in the Clyde models and the earliest V846s is known as the 'halo', so called because of a round metal cover with a circular cutout in the centre. A halo inductor in a metal case was used in the EME-made Italian wahs and is known as the 'trash can' or 'film canister'. When Jen Elettronica took over production, they were fitted with Fasel inductors in various colours. Like the later 'stack of dimes' inductor, all three are highly regarded, but the cube-shaped TDK inductor has fewer fans.

The inductor value is nominally 500mH, so in theory they should all sound the same in circuit. In practice, all these inductors were fairly cheap components and only remain sonically neutral up to a point. In a wah circuit they are pushed beyond that point and they saturate or distort in different ways and produce various harmonic overtones.

When supposedly deactivated, vintage-style wahs load the guitar signal down and drain off treble frequencies

Hey Sucker

The term 'tone sucker' is common in the stompbox world and it's often applied to pedals that make your tone worse, even when they're switched off. Vintage-style wahs are a case in point because when they're supposedly deactivated, they load the guitar signal down and drain off treble frequencies. To get around this, the on/off switch can be converted to true bypass. DPDT or 3PDT switches may be used, with the latter opening up the possibility for an LED status light, but you may experience an annoying thump whenever the pedal is activated. True bypassing a wah may reveal a slight drop in level when the pedal is activated, but you can compensate by swapping the 68k input resistor for a smaller value, such as 47k.

Whether you're in the fuzz-first camp or prefer to have wah up front in your signal chain, you'll encounter pros and cons in both scenarios

Hitting The Buffer

Later fuzzes often feature a buffered bypass circuit that prevents the thumping, although vintage purists often choose to bypass the buffer. Just because something isn't vintage correct doesn't mean it isn't potentially beneficial, and while a buffered input may offend some, a buffered output can help wahs to 'play nice' with Fuzz Face-type pedals.

Fuzz first or wah first? That is the perennial question and the correct answer is yes. Both work, but both can present problems. With wah first in line, an impedance mismatch between the pedals can create a resonant circuit that results in a screeching oscillation. The cure is to place a buffer or a buffered pedal

between the wah and fuzz, or even build an output buffer into the wah.

The downside is that the fuzz won't respond to volume control changes in the classic way. Putting fuzz before the wah allows the fuzz to respond to volume adjustments and presents fewer problems. It's what Hendrix supposedly did – and many would argue it sounds better.

Popular Modifications

Since the inductor type plays such a crucial role, swapping one type of inductor for another can be very effective and it's a simple soldering job. Various companies offer halo replicas and you can choose between the more common red Fasel or the cleaner and funkier-sounding yellow Fasel.

Although 470k, 500k and 1 meg-ohm potentiometers have been reported in some of the earliest Vox wahs, 100k is by far the most common value. Hendrix's pedal tweaker Roger Mayer would substitute potentiometers of different values and used both linear and logarithmic tapers depending on the tone or response that was needed. He also told this writer that much depended on Hendrix's footwear, with high heels resulting in treble emphasis and flat-soled sneakers giving a flatter response.

The taper is the most important thing because it affects the feel and character of the wah. Numerous companies offer replacements and some claim to be upgrades. You may be forced down this avenue if you're a heavy wah user because the potentiometers do wear out. Some have even tried an LED and a light sensitive resistor, with the pot controlling the LED for noise-free operation.

Vintage-style wah units pre-dated pedalboards and stompbox power supplies, so they were powered by battery only. This can be inconvenient if you want to leave your wah permanently installed and plugged in on your 'board. If you're happy to drill a hole in the side of the casing, however, it's easy to retrofit a DC socket. But if you'd prefer to avoid modding a vintage example, you could use a battery clip converter to connect a power supply to the internal battery connectors.

Components can be swapped to change the 'Q' range, increase or decrease bass response, sweeten the treble, alter the peak amplitude or even shift the operating range of the pedal. Some boutique wahs have internal and external switches or controls to make these parameters adjustable. If this sounds appealing, consider a drop-in replacement circuit board. Many come with dip switches and trim pots that allow you to customise your pedal. G

www.huwpriceguitar.com

The Vox and Cry Baby wahs share a similar timeline, with both appearing in the late 60s and continuing to endure on the pedalboards of today's players

Hendrix's pedal tweaker Roger Mayer would substitute potentiometers of different values and tapers depending on the tone needed

Touch Wood

Paul Gough of Zilla Cabs takes a closer look at cabinet materials – and asks what's more important to you, consistency or quality of sound?

Last issue we looked at why wood type can be overlooked in cabinet design, and this time we'll discuss the different types of wood used in speaker cabs and the reasons for choosing them. A designer will often value stability or consistency most highly; after all, if the material doesn't change from cab to cab, the results will be more predictable and easier to reliably reproduce. The trouble is, a lot of materials that are consistent don't always sound as pleasing as we'd hope, at least not to a lot of us guitarists.

MDF is a good example. Medium-density fibreboard is a material that has been favoured by cabinet makers in the past for its consistent behaviour at a low cost, but there are a couple of major downsides – the biggest one being that it generally sounds a bit dead. It can be hard to describe, but it often sounds too controlled, like there is something missing.

So if controlled and stable doesn't always work, then what about flipping and going for wood? This can work really well. As guitarists, we're used to looking at wood on our guitars, but – without wanting to be too controversial – its role in shaping the cabinet's sound is as important, if not more so on some of the instruments we play. But the downside of wood is that every piece is different. Various parts of a tree will have a different density, let alone trees from different forests, which is the opposite problem to MDF. Using wood can be really hard to achieve consistent results, which to me as a player isn't that big of a deal, but as a manufacturer is a real headache.

So that's the extremes – an engineered, consistent material and a natural, inconsistent material – but there has to be something in the middle, a Goldilocks-type material that sounds just right. For me, that middle ground is plywood or, more accurately, birch ply. It's great for strength, consistency (although this can vary more than you'd think), it has a lovely natural EQ to it, and it's a material that is favoured by most cabinet makers. That said, there are many different variations and each cabinet maker seems to have a personal favourite. Mesa/Boogie, for example, favours a marine-grade birch ply, a ply that may use birch from the same forests but has its ply stuck together with a water-resistant glue, which makes the cabinet sound a tad darker. It's probably worth mentioning that fellow Californian manufacturer Fender traditionally used pine on its cabinets, a material that is less predictable but in ample supply on the West Coast.

The ability to make plywood from many different woods means that makers can give a different vibe to a cab without too much sacrificing of consistency. I have been told that Mr Dumble didn't like the sound of birch ply so opted for something different. The next part of the story seems to vary, but it seems he favoured some kind of okoume ply, a material that has some similar qualities to mahogany, definitely has its own sound and is surprisingly light.

Now, if light weight is something you're after in your ply, you'll probably want to go for a type of poplar, usually an Italian poplar.

> "Plywood lets makers give a different vibe to a cab without too much sacrificing of consistency"

The various qualities of different materials, from natural wood to engineered products, can help you decide which cabinet is right for you

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZILLA CABS

It's a nice-sounding material and one that is starting to become much more popular due to the scarcity (and rocketing price) of birch ply and the shift towards lighter gear. It's also an alternative to pine, a wood that was traditionally used to help keep things nice and light.

So I think we're safe to conclude that material really does make a difference to your cabinet. And here's a fun activity to try if you have some wood in your proximity. In our workshop we often try to guess the wood being used on a given tool. As each wood resonates differently on the tools, it sounds different – believe it or not. Obviously, size changes the sound, but there is an audible difference between various types or woods, ply and even differing grades of ply used on machines that cause vibration. They all smell different, too... but you'll know I'm running out of topics when I write a piece on that! G

633 Engineering's cabinets are made from birch ply, the 'Goldilocks' material that Zilla's Paul Gough also favours

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

Even next to Gibson and D'Angelico jazz-era archtops, some find Strombergs the best

1946 Stromberg Master 400

The back and case of this guitar are signed by country and jazz legend Hank Garland

"Elmer Stromberg made maybe less than half of the guitars that John D'Angelico produced. The serial numbers go up to 686, but they appear to start around 300. It was a really small operation with Elmer and his father, Charles, sharing a workshop in Boston, Massachusetts. Charles made drums, banjos and ukuleles, but when guitar became the choice for big bands, Elmer just followed the trend. Elmer probably never imagined he'd end up producing one of the better archtop guitars ever made.

"At first, Elmer pressed the tops and made laminated backs and sides, but he then hand-carved solid spruce tops and maple backs. Having started with cross and parallel top braces – the convention for archtop acoustic guitars – Elmer changed to a single brace that ran diagonally under the top.

"Although the earlier guitars are well regarded and collectible, the golden era for Stromberg archtops is considered to be 1940 to '55. Production ceased when Charles and Elmer died within a few months of each other; it's been estimated that only around 150 guitars were made during this period.

"This example is most likely from '46, but the absence of records, and serial number inconsistencies, make it hard to be exact. Stromberg made several different models, but the Master 300 and 400 were really the ones to buy, and the 400 was the big daddy.

"It's a relatively plain-looking guitar. The tuners have been changed for a vintage Epiphone set, but the post holes were never altered. I could put a set of Grover Imperials back on it and nobody would be able to tell because there are no extra holes. Despite being very clean, there's lots of lacquer checking and there's a small area on the treble bout where the finish is flaking. This sometimes indicates water damage, but the original case shows no sign of that and the wood isn't swollen or misshapen, so it was probably caused by humidity. The headstock has never been broken and there's a 'widow's peak' on the back of the peghead. It's actually a veneer overlay, rather than a painted 'stinger', and the neck is a maple laminate construction with two stripes of mahogany.

> "This Stromberg is so overwhelmingly loud, it's kind of like a grand piano because it sounds so big"

"Combined with a 19-inch lower bout, Stromberg's single top brace made his guitars very loud and bassy. They used to call them 'trombone cutters' because they could compete against the horn section in a big band situation. Players used to pound their guitars and you can see that in any big band footage from the late 30s to mid-40s. The guitars were purely acoustic rhythm guitars that were meant to cut through; they weren't really looking for tonal flavour.

"Once guitar amplifiers became available, many of these guitars got DeArmond pickups fitted. They were only using small amps, but they had to keep them turned down low to avoid feedback and all kinds of issues because the tops were so lively.

"Compared with the bassy projecting tone of Stromberg's single-braced tops, Gibson's larger archtops leaned towards a midrange tone. The D'Angelicos I find are somewhere in between, with a bit more low-end than the Gibsons and more midrange than Strombergs. A D'Angelico is perhaps the better guitar for soloists. But this Stromberg is so overwhelmingly loud, it's kind of like a grand piano because it sounds so big.

"Hank Garland loved his big 19-inch guitars and was one of those players who could meld together country and jazz. Hank signed it on the back and he also signed the case. He had a couple of the earlier G model guitars and a very rare Master 300 cutaway, so I believe he was probably the company's highest profile customer.

"When I bought the guitar I didn't pay any premium; it was only signed by Hank Garland and there wasn't any proof of ownership. But later I was contacted by a gentleman who was managing the sale of Hank's guitar collection and he was very aware of the guitar. He told me it had been sold by a family member soon after he died.

"I think Elmer was constantly striving for artist endorsements, but Gibson had so many name players signed up. Most of the serious jazz guys were up in New York and they loved the fact that they could go down to John D'Angelico's shop and walk right in the door. The Strombergs were in Boston, and the bottom line is – had they been in New York, they would have attracted more artist representation and be more widely recognised today." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

Elmer Stromberg tended not to use extremely flamed or figured maple, instead picking what he considered to be the best tonewoods

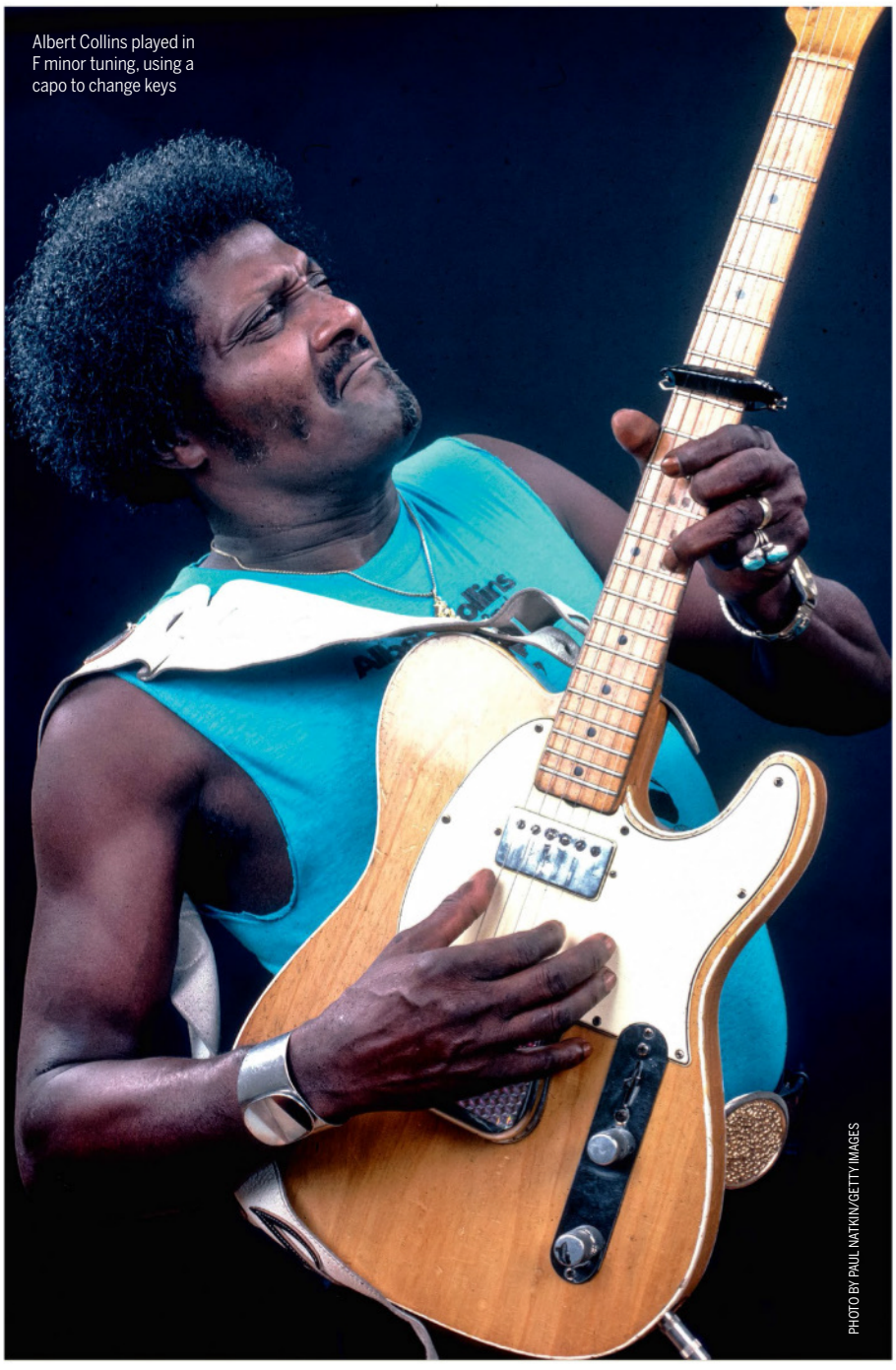
PHOTOS BY KAITLYN CRISP/WELLSTRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Albert Collins: The Iceman

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank & Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 15 mins per example



Albert Collins played in F minor tuning, using a capo to change keys

PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

KNOWN AS THE ICEMAN and master of the Telecaster, Albert Collins is also revered for his flamboyant stage presence and piercing tone. However, listening back to his early recordings, you'll also discover a pioneer of electric blues with a distinctive turn of phrase and a driven tone that didn't become mainstream until several years later.

To hear this in action, listen to his debut solo single, *Freeze*, from 1958 or, continuing with the ice-based theme, *Frosty*, another great example that became his signature tune (and the inspiration for these example licks). Recorded in 1964 but gaining more notoriety after its reissue in 1969, *Frosty* was way ahead of the curve concerning the 60s blues resurgence. It was recorded using the neck pickup, relatively unusual for Albert, but his playing still cuts through the mix with ease.

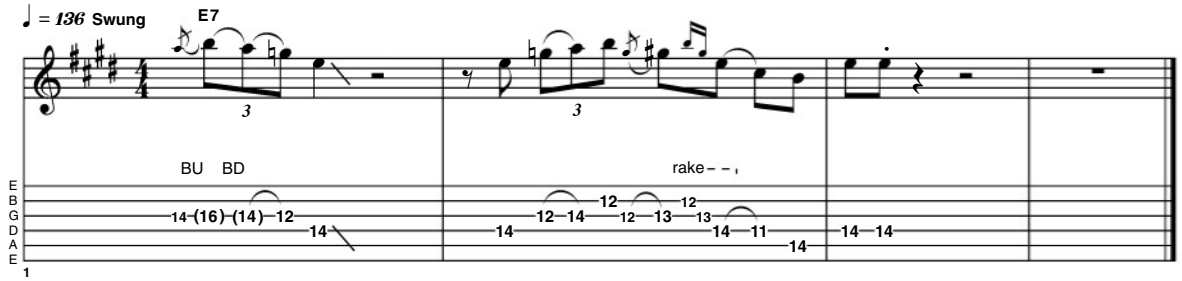
If you're looking to incorporate a bit of The Iceman's magic into your own playing, you may be interested to know that Albert played using his thumb and fingers for an extra snappy attack. I opted for a little extra treble on the amp and dug in harder with the pick, which helped me get a better result more quickly in the studio, but to be 100 per cent authentic, it's worth ditching the pick and seeing how that might change your approach to phrasing.

Further to that, Albert played in a non-standard F minor tuning (low to high: F C F A♭ C F) using a capo to shift between keys. It wasn't unusual to see him capo as high as the 7th fret, which would give an open C minor chord as a starting point. I've stuck with standard tuning for convenience – this is more about cherry picking some cool ideas than trying to impersonate the great man. Hope you enjoy and see you next time!

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours* (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

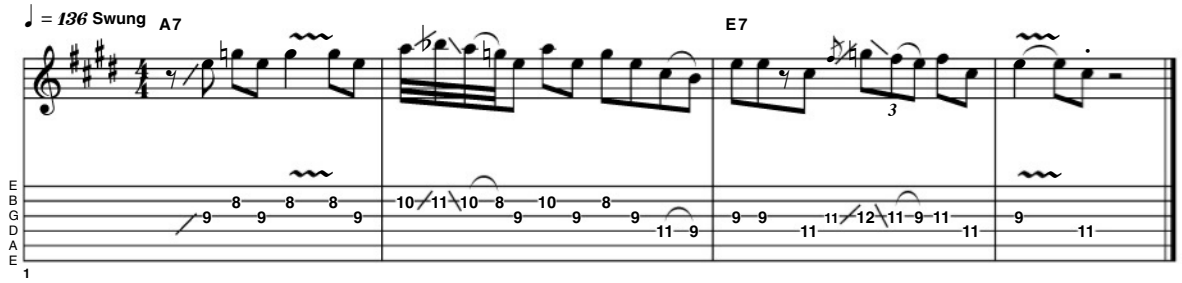
Example 1

AS WE'RE IN THE KEY OF E MAJOR, I've been careful to incorporate the major 3rd (G#) in what otherwise looks like a shape 1 E minor pentatonic phrase – for now. Being the blues, it's common to hear the major and minor 3rds together in a phrase. At the end of bar 3, I've taken the slightly unusual step of pulling off to C# (the 6th) where D (♭7th) would be the normal choice. This is an attempt to emulate the kind of phrases that fall under the fingers in Albert's preferred tuning.



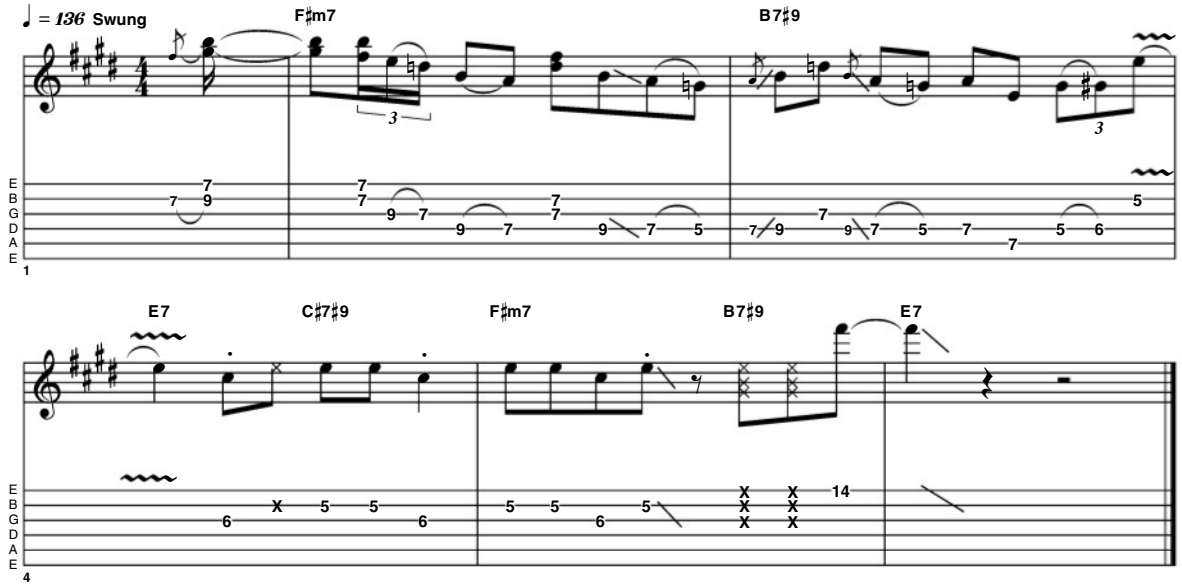
Example 2

I'VE ALREADY MENTIONED the 6th (C#) that occurs in Example 1. This is a key part of blues vocabulary, but in *Frosty* it figures even more highly. I put this down to what comes most naturally in Albert's F minor tuning, but it's fairly easy to make a few adjustments and play 'outside the box' while keeping the best attributes of the minor pentatonic shapes. See bars 2, 3 and 4 for some examples – this phrase even ends on a C# to press the point further.



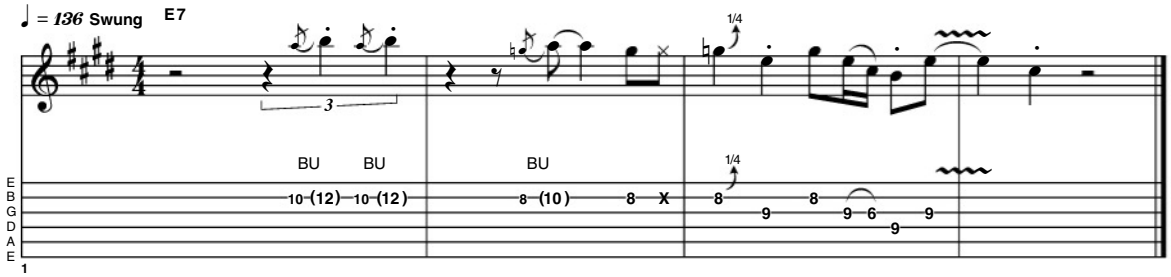
Example 3

I'VE TRIED EXTRA HARD TO PLAY OUTSIDE the 'normal' patterns here, to the point where the first phrase (based around E major) isn't an obvious choice at all. However, I felt it reflected the way Albert managed to make patterns fit over what could be quite complex changes compared with a regular 12-bar blues. You'll see a few 6ths and a rhythmic approach, plus a sort of cameo from BB King in that final note. Slightly off-topic, but I liked it!



Example 4

AN ALTERNATIVE TAKE on the first phrase, here I've continued with the approach of altering pentatonic-based phrases to include the 6th (C#). You'll notice I haven't jumped straight in on beat 1 of bar 1, or played constantly though each example. While learning 'silence in the style of Albert Collins' isn't really what you're here for, I think the placement of those silences is a key ingredient in making the phrases pop out when they do happen.



Hear It Here

ALBERT COLLINS
TRUCKIN' WITH ALBERT COLLINS

Originally released in 1965 as *The Cool Sound Of Albert Collins*, this album contains signature tune *Frosty*, along with several of Albert's previous releases. *Thaw Out* has some nimble phrases fired between regular pauses, which feature some cool Doors-esque organ playing. In *Kool Aide*, Albert manages to hold centre stage without breaking a sweat – punctuating with plenty of space. Finally, *Icy Blue* shows how he rakes across the strings to generate faster phrases.

ALBERT COLLINS
THERE'S GOTTA BE A CHANGE

Pushing forward to 1971, Albert's sound has moved with the times but retains its signature, with lots of searing bends, vibrato and rapid-fire pentatonic phrases. You'll hear a lot of this material on the title track, plus *Stickin'*, where he incorporates a bit of funky wah and shows himself to be more than able to hold down a groovy rhythm riff, too. *I Got A Mind To Travel* demonstrates how Albert handles a classic slow blues.

ALBERT COLLINS
ICE PICKIN'

Collins' label Tumbleweed closed in 1973, so this next album didn't appear until '78. The guitarist remained active for many more years, guesting with the likes of David Bowie, John Mayall and Gary Moore, but this LP seems to capture his enthusiasm at returning to the studio. Check out his feedbacking sustained notes on *When The Welfare Turns Its Back On You*, his funky rhythm and piercing phrasing on *Ice Pick*, and a nod to *Frosty* on album closer, *Avalanche*.

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Nextmonth

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MARK KNOPFLER

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